

# Anger erupts at Flint public hearing

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2 April 2016

Angry residents packed an auditorium in Flint and signed up for an opportunity to testify before Michigan legislators at a hearing held Tuesday. Even though the proceedings lasted a total of nine hours, people waited until the last part to speak, where residents were allowed three minutes each to speak.

A state legislative panel, the Michigan Joint Committee on the Flint Water Public Health Emergency, convened the session, and posed questions to those testifying. The legislators were both Republicans and Democrats, including State Rep. Ed Canfield, State Sen. Joe Hune, State Rep. Ed McBroom, State Sen. Jim Stamas, State Sen. Jim Ananich and state Rep. Jeff Irwin.

LeeAnne Walters, the Flint mother whose children were diagnosed with lead poisoning months after the city switched its water source from treated water pumped from Lake Huron to the corrosive Flint River gave the first testimony. Walters presented a detailed chronology of her ordeal after it became “very apparent that the city was not being truthful” in providing answers about the water, when she was accused by authorities of having “an agenda.” She described eventually turning to water expert Dr. Marc Edwards from Virginia Tech University to conduct a sampling of the entire city of Flint.

A member of the committee asked about improper testing being carried by state water officials. Walters told of three loopholes in the lead and copper rule concerning sampling and said the state is still violating proper procedures. She told the committee, to the applause of the audience, “nobody trusts the city or the state or the EPA. They trust Virginia Tech.”

Pediatrician Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha described how she came to conduct a study revealing the spike in children’s blood-lead levels after the switch to Flint River water. Last summer, when the Virginia Tech testing of Flint’s water for lead began to make

headlines, she invited a long-time friend, who happened to be a water engineer, to dinner. It was the friend who suggested to Hanna-Attisha that she use her access to blood-lead results to do a study.

Once Hanna-Attisha became focused on the pursuit of those answers, she and an assistant conducted the work that would have taken six months for a normal research team, in only two weeks, by “not sleeping at night.” Other health agencies were not helpful. When she contacted the Genesee County Health Department for help, their response was that it was “not in our jurisdiction.”

Hanna-Attisha’s testimony shed light on some of the deep-going social issues around the city’s lead poisoning. She described the traumatic response of many of her patients’ parents, with deep anxiety and guilt.

In response to a question on cuts in food stamps and nutrition programs for pregnant mothers, she said, “I think nutrition is probably the most important thing we can do with this issue. We were hit harder by this because of pre-existing poor nutrition.” She added, “We need long-term great nutrition. We have no full-service grocery store in the city of Flint. None.”

Flint Utilities Manager Mike Glasgow, who at the time of the switch to Flint River water was the water department’s lab supervisor, was also questioned. Before the changeover, he had sent an email to Mike Prysby of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) saying that the plant was not ready and objecting to the April 25, 2014 deadline. He described higher-up officials as having “an agenda.”

Glasgow testified that in 2005 when he came to work at the Flint water treatment plant, there were some 40 employees. That is when the plant was virtually mothballed, serving only as an emergency backup for the Detroit system. By the time the switch was to be made, there were only 26 workers. He said that he got

no response to his email protesting the rushed schedule.

Glasgow testified that he had expected to continue the orthophosphate treatment that Detroit had been using for decades, but Prysby told him that the corrosion control treatment would not be necessary. In addition, the technology needed to apply the treatment into the water had not been installed at the plant.

After the session had gone on for six hours, other Flint residents were allotted three minutes each to speak. Their anger became so apparent from the first speaker on, that the panel dared not enforce the time limit.

Dorothy Batchelder, who has “nieces and nephews who have been poisoned,” challenged the legislators on the panel over their lack of knowledge on the Flint situation. She asked how many had read a 2007 sediment report on the Flint River which characterized the river as a “Superfund” site, i.e., a candidate for federal environmental cleanup funds. She asserted that the river should never have been used as a water source.

She went on to slam the emergency manager law, which was used by the Governor Rick Snyder to install emergency managers in Flint who made the decision to switch water sources. “I am mad and I am angry!” She went on, “I thought I lived in a Republic where democracy ruled and the Constitution meant something! I am tired of living in an oligarchy!”

Keri Webber described how the lead poisoning affected her family. She said, “If you look at the governor’s 75-point plan, there is still nothing in there for those over the age of six or seven.”

Her husband has lead-induced high blood pressure and “it is killing him by the day.” And due to a Medicaid “spend-down,” they are \$8,800 in debt just for medical issues relating to his eye. Her 16-year-old daughter has liver issues and bone scans show lead lines throughout her entire body. Her 20-year-old daughter had pneumonia for three months and didn’t find out until December that she had been infected with the *Legionella* bacteria.

Adam Murphy worked at the General Motors parts plant that disconnected from Flint water in October 2014. He spoke with his whole family about their conditions: “I was working at General Motors when we heard about this. A gentleman working on the line in the engine plant noticed some corrosion on the parts

they were making.

“So, 90 days went by with us realizing not just the lead in the water, that happened after, the corrosive chemical that doesn’t really get talked about, went down our throats and into our body. That’s what was corroding all these parts.

“That 3.4 million dollars in damage was done to General Motors. Several months—6 months, 8 months. I don’t know—they wait to let the public know. And as that’s going on, this project, they’re putting all new pipes in, they shut the switch off from the Flint River, and they get the Detroit water.”

Murphy said GM can switch water sources because “money is power.” He added, “Where’s my job? I made \$85,000. It’s all gone.... I want something. Enough is enough with this mindset—heartless business.” Murphy continued emotionally, “My teeth are falling out. All our teeth. My kids. Brand new teeth coming in. They’re corroding.”

Cheryl Little also spoke: “I get so tired of hearing: ‘Flint, Flint, it’s the poor little city people...’ General Motors was built on my back. And a whole lot of other people built Flint and everything else around the world. We made the cars and the trucks. Now what we’re getting for thanks. We are poisoned. Blatantly poisoned.”



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