# Outrage erupts at Flint meeting of pipeline board

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The city of Flint City Council chambers was the site of a meeting of the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA) board on Wednesday. The meeting was open to the public as is customary, but when the public comment portion of the agenda was reached, the outpouring of anger of Flint residents from the floor led to the chairman losing control of the meeting.

The last public meeting of the KWA board scheduled for April was cancelled, so Wednesday's meeting was the first held since February 17. Since then, countless revelations have emerged in the media about the years-long cover-up of the real state of the poisoned drinking water from the Flint River and the conspiracy, in the first place, to force the city of Flint to cut off its long-established source of safe water from Detroit's system and sign on to the KWA pipeline project.

The KWA pipeline scheme had been the pet project of Jeff Wright, the Genesee County drain commissioner and a Democrat, for close to a decade. But it never came to fruition until the city of Flint, the largest city by far in the three-county area to be served by the pipeline, committed to 35 percent of its construction costs in April 2013. At that time, Flint was under the command of a state-appointed emergency manager, Ed Kurtz, whose singular mandate was to cut costs.

The KWA pipeline project was designed to provide raw, untreated water from Lake Huron to farmers and industrial customers. The pipeline Detroit's public water system built in the early 1970s provides treated water from Lake Huron and is just six miles south of the KWA site. The KWA sales pitch was that the cost of their water would be less than from Detroit's treated water system.

Buying into the promise of cheap water from the KWA led to the scheme of getting "free water" from the toxic Flint River in the interim until the KWA pipeline was completed. But the decision to use the Flint River as a water source is one that no official has ever publicly taken responsibility for making. Although Wright was the primary mover for Flint's switch away from Detroit-supplied water, he claims he had no hand in the decision to use the Flint River as a source.

In his official capacity as drain commissioner, Wright anticipated the interim period of the KWA pipeline construction by buying a nine-mile stretch of pipeline from the city of Flint so outlying Genesee County could still receive the treated water from the Detroit system it had always been getting.

Authorities ignored warnings that Flint's virtually mothballed water treatment facility did not have the manpower or capacity to treat the water with anti-corrosives, and essentially rolled the dice with untreated water from the Flint River, long a dumping ground for General Motors' industrial waste. The KWA project provided lucrative opportunities to politically connected contractors and some have raised it may also be beneficial to the fracking industry.

Early in Wednesday's meeting, KWA CEO Wright declared his pride in announcing that the pipeline construction was on time and would be completed by June or July. He then dropped the other shoe. It would be another year before the completion of the treatment plant that would allow water to be piped into homes in outlying Genesee County. As far as the city of Flint, Wright estimated that the timeframe would be similar to complete the upgrades to its treatment facility.

And, he added, that because of the federal Environmental Protection Agency's requirement that the water be tested for from three to six months before being used as a public source, another three-mile stretch of pipe would have to be built to accommodate this. The costs, as well as who would pay for it and

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who would build it, were underdetermined, he said, and "outside the purview of the KWA contract." KWA attorney Kevin Kilby backed up Wright in this assertion by citing point 4.37 of the 2013 contract between Flint and the KWA. Flint city councilman and KWA board member Eric Mays described this as "dropping a bombshell."

Some 50 to 60 people sat in the audience. Flint residents rose to speak from the floor one after another to express their outrage. KWA chairman Greg Alexander tried to direct speakers to address only "agenda items" and limit their remarks to two minutes, but it became clear that he could not control the meeting.

One speaker, to loud applause from the floor, called the KWA a "conspiracy," saying, "I never wanted anything to do with it! If we had a choice, none of us would want the KWA!" Another speaker pointed out that no one on the board presented any "real options for us!" Leroy Jackson, pointing to Wright, said, "Wright stole our nine miles of pipeline!" And to the board as a whole, proclaimed, "Get out of Flint and don't come back!"

Christopher spoke about "transparency," adding, "Who owns the property under the pipeline?" All that information should be in the KWA reports, he said.

Lucille Williams brought her young son up to the microphone and addressed Wright about his comments on the additional costs and delay in getting Flint online. "How dare you?" she said. Then, appealing to Flint's mayor, Karen Weaver, who sat silently next to the chairman, she called for "renegotiating." To provide a political cover to herself, Weaver recently made public comments that Flint may break its deal with the KWA.

Williams added, "We're tired, and we're fed up, but we're holding on. We don't have to stay with KWA! We'll shut this city down if we have to! I'm not scared!"

Tony Palladeno made the point that it is a conscious policy of KWA to pile extra costs "on the poor people—white and black."

Keith, a Flint resident, charged Wright and other KWA officials with lying to get Flint signed on. He added, "Obama was here—your president—not mine any more because he came here and said it didn't matter if we were being poisoned because when he was little he was poisoned too and he turned out all right. If you believe that, I have some property you might be interested in buying!" He also directed a comment to Mayor Weaver that he has lost all respect for her because of the actions of her staff.

The eruption at the meeting is example of deep class tensions in the city. The water crisis was only brought to international attention because of the determined resistance of the working-class residents of Flint. Since last October, when Michigan governor Rick Snyder finally admitted that Flint's drinking water was poisoned with lead and other toxins and was forced to provide the funds to return to Detroit water, new revelations of corruption and conspiracy have emerged virtually every day.

At the same time, virtually nothing has been done to bring relief to residents. The antiquated lead pipe system remains, and only a pittance has been provided for the lifelong challenges that children in the city face.

Finishing the KWA pipeline, as Wright revealed at Wednesday's meeting, only brings more problems to light. The recklessness with which the scheme was hatched and the lies by which it was sold are being exposed.

Politicians, both Republicans and Democrats, give lip service to clean water but behind the scenes make deals to allow corporate interests to profit from supplying this most basic of all needs to the population. Obama's cynical "everything is fine" appearance in Flint is a warning that both big-business parties intend to sweep the water crisis under the rug. It is clear, however, that Flint workers have no intention of accepting that.

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