

Outpouring of anger at Flint town hall meeting

James Brewer
13 January 2017

A meeting was held Wednesday evening in downtown Flint by the state of Michigan to discuss the progress of the recovery of the city's water system. It was originally planned to be a closed, by-invitation-only event where only those chosen by state officials would be able to participate.

A public outcry forced the state to open the event to the public as soon as news was released of the exclusive function. The title of the meeting was changed to "Flint Water Town Hall," and printouts were distributed saying, "The purpose of the meeting is to share the most recent and up-to-date information with Flint residents regarding the status of the Flint water system and to answer residents' question regarding water quality, filters, health and medical resources."

The venue, with a capacity of only 300, on the University of Michigan, Flint campus, was filled to overflowing. Residents were angry and anxious that self-satisfied public officials would declare an end to the dangerous situation with the city's water. The police presence was notable, with uniformed and plain-clothed officers throughout the meeting room.

The meeting was hosted by Richard Baird, a sinister operative and special adviser to Michigan Governor Rick Snyder and Flint Mayor Karen Weaver. Two panels were scheduled: one on water quality and one on health care. A question-and-answer period was scheduled toward the end of the three-hour event, but questions had to be submitted on notecards so they could be screened first.

The apparent stage-managing of the event did not sit well with many residents in the audience. Water bottles were crumbled in unison to express discontent with remarks that were particularly offensive. The picture of improving water quality and expanding efforts to meet

the needs regarding infrastructure replacement and public assistance did not coincide with the experiences of many.

The panel on water quality consisted of eight state, local and federal officials. Dr. Marc Edwards, who was instrumental in conducting the sampling of Flint homes in the summer of 2015 that exposed the lies of state and local water officials that the water was safe, participated by Skype. Both he and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) water expert Miguel Del Toral presented figures showing that lead levels had significantly decreased since the city reconnected to the treated water supplied by the Detroit system in October 2016. EPA and Edwards continue to recommend that residents do not drink the water without the use of filters.

Weaver's appointee to head the city's "Fast Start" lead service line replacement program, retired Brigadier General Michael McDaniel, reported that only 780 lines have been replaced to date. Based on the progress made so far, he said it would take at least three years to finish replacing those lines they knew were lead, but it was still unknown how many lead service lines were in place in the city. He repeated the phrase: we are doing the "best we can with the resources we have."

Moreover, he announced that funding to finish the pipe replacement was, at this point, not forthcoming.

JoLisa McDay, appointed by Weaver to manage the Flint Water Treatment Plant, spoke glowingly of the collaboration between the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality and city employees at the plant, but admitted that the plant had outdated procedures in place for equipment that was no longer in service, employees had no training and that for decades the plant had never functioned except as a quarterly backup formality.

McDay announced that an investment of an “estimated” \$105 million was needed to make the improvements necessary to the plant. She then glibly described that additional chlorination of the water—an issue that many residents complain affects skin and hair—was necessary because of the large size of Flint’s water infrastructure, which was designed originally to service 300,000 people. The population of Flint is now under 100,000.

Adam Murphy, a millwright and father of five, who worked at the GM Engine Plant before he lost his job, could no longer restrain himself. He blurted out his opposition to the course of the meeting and found himself in the hands of police who were preparing to eject him. Much of the crowd got to its feet, clapping and demanding that Murphy be allowed to remain in the meeting.

The police backed off and Murphy was allowed to stay. Shortly afterward, he got up to denounce the official dialogue. He said: “Shame on you guys. Half a million dollars to Marc Edwards and only 156 homes were tested. You’re telling me it took all that frickin’ money? No! You didn’t spend all the damn money testing homes, because you haven’t been to my house lately. And my house is 530 parts per billion...after the state ripped all the pipes out of my house... you’re wasting our time and we’re dying.” *[See note at end of article from Edwards replying to this statement]*

“People have died from the damn water, and all you guys can sit up there and just pretend like it’s no big deal! You all look like a joke. You should be ashamed of yourself. You guys can just talk, say what you want to say and everybody’s just supposed to believe your crap.”

The rest of the evening was spent trying to retain control of the meeting. Weaver professed to be grateful for the input of the residents at the same time trying to maintain order. Other residents voiced their outrage at the conditions in Flint.

After the meeting, the WSWs spoke with Melissa Mays, a Flint resident and water activist. She traveled with her family to Chicago the day before where an EPA meeting was held on the Flint water crisis. Melissa wanted to hear the discussion there and said that as Flint residents they should have been there but were not allowed in. “They don’t listen to us,” she said.

About the meeting in Flint, she added, “Well, this meeting was originally supposed to be invitation-only and activists, residents that I know, no one got an invitation, so we assume, since the state set this up, that it was going to be people that support what the state is doing, which is a whole glossing over everything.

“So we made a big stink. Dr. Laura Sullivan was going to boycott the meeting. Then the mayor said it wasn’t going to happen unless it was open to the public and there was an overflow room. We still had to write our questions down on notecards. I put in eight cards full of questions. Not one of them got asked. They shuffle through and they nitpick which ones they want. They cherry pick the questions, but they tell us they’ll put it up online. It’s the same ridiculous things that we’ve been going through for two years.”

Dr. Marc Edwards, who was not present at the Flint Water Town Hall event to answer resident Adam Murphy, contacted the WSWs in order to respond to the implication made by Murphy at the Town Hall that \$500,000 was paid to Edwards to sample 156 homes. His response follows:

“Our actual total contract with EPA was \$38,000. Moreover, that money was used to hire a team of Flint residents to do the work and pay for the chemical analysis. I also paid, out of my own pocket, \$20 to each Flint resident who participated in the sampling. And LeeAnne Walters volunteers her time to lead the Flint sampling team. These projects have been very cost effective in monitoring the water lead problem, and have put money into the pockets of Flint residents who have helped us. Maybe the reason some residents are so mad is that they are getting false information.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact