

Flint, Michigan begins water shutoffs

James Brewer
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Several residents of Flint, Michigan are facing imminent water shutoffs in the leading edge of the city's offensive to force residents to resume paying their water bills. Flint has been in the news worldwide since it was revealed in September of 2016 that its water was poisoned by high levels of lead. The catastrophe was the outcome of a series of decisions made by the state leading to the disconnection of the city from the Detroit water system and a switch to water drawn from the polluted Flint River, without proper treatment.

On Monday, Flint scheduled the shutoff of water to two apartment complexes, Orchard Lane Manor and Lakeside apartments, with, as described by the city, "accounts drastically past due." This would have affected 18 residents who the city claims have not made water payments for at least five months. Subsequently, Orchard Lane Manor made a \$9,000 payment on its \$65,000 balance, to avert the shutoff, leaving Lakeside, with an out-of-state landlord owing some \$50,000, targeted for shutoff.

In a press release issued Monday, Flint Mayor Karen Weaver stated, "Unfortunately, we have several apartment owners who have not stepped up and instead ignored their responsibility to their tenants and our community. They are not allowed months and months of leniency on electric bills, and we cannot allow them to take advantage of the City of Flint."

This is largely a test case by Weaver and city officials, since only three of the 42 units at Lakeside are occupied. The announcement by the city of the resumption of shutoffs last month has provoked anger from residents who have suspected that the announcement by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in January of improved lead levels in Flint would be used by authorities to sweep the water crisis under the carpet and get back to business as usual.

On February 7, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder's right-hand man, Richard Baird, officially informed the City of Flint that the 65 percent subsidy to resident's water bills would be ending at the end of that month. Weaver very publicly insisted on a meeting with Snyder, after which she professed to disagree with the state's decision. At a press conference afterward, she said, "He stated that Flint's water now meets the same quality standards as other communities in Michigan and meets the federal quality standards and in his opinion the water is good. And I told him that I disagree."

Although the EPA reported lead levels have gone below its official action level, residents are warned by health officials not to drink the water without the use of approved filters.

A resident of Lakeside, David Martinez, is waiting for the landlord to make a payment on the water bill to resolve the shutoff threat, at least temporarily. He moved in with his wife and two children on February 1, and is already using a gas stove to keep his home warm. He told the *Detroit Free Press* on Wednesday, "I'm crossing my fingers and hoping. We're not animals. We are a family."

Weaver and her administration are well aware of principled refusal among residents to "pay for poison." Yet, Weaver is trying to play both sides; on the one hand, claiming sympathy for the residents and "sharing their anger," while on the other, implementing the shutoff plan to keep water revenues—roughly \$20 million a year—coming in.

Flint resident Florlisa Fowler messaged this reporter on her feelings about fighting the shutoffs. "I know Melissa's group [Melissa Mays of Water You Fighting For] and I believe Flint Rising is advocating not to pay their bill. We on the other hand have not done so due to the fact that many of us are homeowners—the city would just tack it onto our property tax, then charge more fees. Then if it wasn't paid, they would take our

homes and put them in the city's land bank. We have had this issue before, and it has been dubbed by the homeowners as the 'Land Grab.'”

Snyder has continued to weather the political storm caused by the criminal decisions and lies of his own agencies, claiming ignorance of the water crisis in Flint until October 2015—a highly implausible scenario. His own appointees in the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ)—the body responsible for protecting water safety—conducted a systematic campaign of deceit from April of 2014 onward against any suggestion by residents or water experts that there was something wrong with the Flint River water.

After the exposure of the poisoning of Flint's water, Snyder's strategy has been to appoint panels and investigative bodies that have so far only indicted lower level officials while shielding those at the top. His civil rights panel has spent over a year producing a report covering up for the real class interests behind the crime against Flint and reducing the root of the water crisis against the mixed-race city to “systemic racism.”

A year ago, as the public was calling for his recall and incarceration, Snyder unveiled a “75-point plan” to address the damage done to Flint. The following month, he announced “tougher” regulations for the MDEQ than the federal EPA for lead in water, by lowering the “action threshold” from 15 parts per billion (ppb) to 10 ppb, to be implemented by 2020.

This is already being exposed as a farce. Water experts and doctors acknowledge that there is no safe level of exposure to lead and that the EPA's 15-ppb action level is ludicrously outdated. Lowering it to 10 ppb amounts to little more than a grandstanding ploy.

Across Michigan, as lead testing results are being publicized, it has been revealed that the tap water of hundreds of thousands of residents is above Snyder's new action threshold. Yet, there is nothing in place to deal with this crisis. The *Detroit News* published an article on Monday reporting that more than three-dozen Michigan public water systems, serving almost 380,000 residents, have test results exceeding Snyder's threshold for lead.

One of the systems serves Monroe, a small city south of Detroit, where Water Department Director Barry LaRoy told the *News* that Snyder's directive could be just an “unfunded mandate.”



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