

Water bill deadline looms for 8,000 Flint households

By James Brewer
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Some 8,000 residents of the city of Flint, Michigan are facing a May 19 deadline to pay a significant portion of their outstanding water bills before property tax liens are issued against their homes. Despite the fact that the water is still not safe to drink three years after the city began pumping foul, improperly treated water from the Flint River into homes, authorities are seeking to regularize the cycle of water bill payment and force residents to pay for the poisoned water.

The offensive by Democratic Mayor Karen Weaver, backed by the Michigan governor's office under Republican Rick Snyder, is aimed particularly at residents who have, on principle, refused to pay for the toxic water. As the 65 percent water bill subsidy from the state of Michigan ended earlier this year, only 55 percent of residential accounts were current. The 8,002 shutoff notices sent out total nearly \$6 million for delinquent water and sewer charges.

After the May 19 deadline, outstanding balances will be automatically applied to a property tax lien. At that point, homeowners have until February 28, 2018 to pay in full. Many residents have spoken with hatred about the "land bank" scheme in which homes are foreclosed on and taken over by the county.

Weaver professes sympathy for the residents, but claims to have no say over the process.

In February, Snyder's right-hand-man, Richard Baird, sent a letter to the city of Flint saying that the water relief credits being issued to residents would be stopped by the end of the month.

Within days, the city announced that water shutoffs would be resumed for citizens in arrears. This was the state's response to the improving results in water quality testing by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The results, however, still showed levels barely below the EPA action level and experts

such as Virginia Tech's Professor Marc Edwards warned that it was still unsafe to drink.

From April 2014 through September 2015 the state agencies responsible for safe drinking water were, in fact, poisoning the water and lying to residents that it complied with EPA standards. Since the exposure of the toxic character of Flint's water, and the lies being spun by state officials, as well as its exposure by Edwards, who led an independent sampling by a team from his university, Snyder has been in damage control mode.

Among other cosmetic actions, Snyder announced that the state of Michigan would establish water standards even higher than those of the EPA. The cynicism of such edicts is revealed in Snyder's logic for cutting Flint residents' water subsidies: that Flint's lead-in-water levels are now similar to dozens of other water systems within Michigan. Some 380,000 residents around the state get their water from systems that do not meet the state's new standards, which are yet to take effect.

Yet, Flint residents still suffer from much more than lead poisoning. The 18-month period when Flint River water was pumped through the city's pipes without corrosion control treatment destroyed Flint's water infrastructure. The skin rashes, hair loss and breathing issues that residents protested from the beginning are still being experienced. Legionnaires disease, which sickened close to 100 and killed at least 12 in Flint, may well re-emerge as it does in the warm summer months. Other respiratory illnesses are rampant in Flint, caused by waterborne bacteria.

There are some 9,000 children in Flint who have been exposed to lead from the water. Flint pediatrician Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, who was instrumental in exposing the spike in children's' blood-lead levels, has

consistently promulgated the known medical fact that the half-life [the time required for the concentration of a substance in the body to decrease by half] of lead in human blood is only 30 days before it migrates into other systems, especially into bones. So, years after exposure, a well-balanced healthy diet is vital to fight against future effects of lead toxicity.

The state has allocated \$7 million to assist families of Flint children provide such a diet. That amounts to a one-time allotment of \$420 per child— a piddling sum. Yet, as reported in the *Detroit Free Press* on Sunday, an unknown number of residents who have had to move outside the city for the safety of their families are being denied even that paltry benefit.

The so-called recovery of Flint is no such thing for those who must live there. Home values have plummeted and the water bill arrears that many residents are now stuck with will take an increasing share of the value of their homes, making it impossible for many who want to leave the city to relocate.

Meanwhile, behind the backs of the people of Flint, Weaver worked for months with officials, including Baird, Jeff Wright of the Karegnondi Water Authority pipeline, Susan McCormick from the Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA), Keith Creagh from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, Robert Kaplan from the EPA and John Young of the American Water Works Service Company, to come up with a deal that would satisfy all their concerns and hopefully placate residents.

On April 17, Weaver announced that there would be no more future water source switches and that the GLWA (the successor to the Detroit water system) would foot the \$7 million annual bill to the KWA bondholders to satisfy the predators who put Flint in its current situation.

Weaver's announcement stipulated that there would be a 30-day "discussion period" during which residents could raise "feedback, questions and concerns." The first meeting, on April 20, was held in a church. Flint police officers, wearing bullet-proof vests and armed with loaded firearms, announced that the church's rules would be enforced. As a result, 6 people were arrested for protesting; they are still waiting for charges to be filed against them by the police.

The only subsequent "public" meeting held after that was a radio call-in show on a gospel-based AM radio

station that lasted only 30 minutes.

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