

Information Meeting on Water Issues in Detroit

July 30, 2014 7:00pm – 9:00pm (actual meeting time ran longer)

Moderating: Sharon Mills and Reverend Roger Mohr

Welcome: Reverend Roger Mohr

- An opportunity to discuss the water shut-offs in a productive way to seek areas of agreement.
- Reading from the hymnal #594 “Principles and Purposes for All of Us”
- We are meeting to discuss a topic that is strongly felt on both sides. Morally righteous opinions on both sides will be considered wrong. We need to find a way to agree, to build a consensus of how we will work together for a larger project.

Chalice lighting: Reverend Roger Mohr

Introduction: Sharon Mills

- Social justice emphasis to the evening
- Topics to cover: what are the issues?, where do we stand?, where do we go from here?
- It is our goal to inform with productive dialogue, and decide how to move forward from here:

Subject Matter Experts present: Sharon Mills

- Curt Guyette, ACLU
- Michael Sabbagh, Wayne State University
- Kurt Thornbladh, Attorney, Water Class Action lawsuit
- Lila Cabbil, Peoples Waterboard, Rosa Parks Institute

Meeting format: Sharon Mills

- Please limit remarks to 3 minutes or less
- Identify yourself and your organization before beginning your message.

**Issue #1: Is access to water a basic human right? Is there a civil rights component to this issue? Should there be designated consumer protections?**

Speaker #1: Identified as a resident of Windsor, and a member of 1<sup>st</sup> UU Detroit

- Acknowledge that water is a basic human right.
- There was a plan put forth in the mid 200's for a payment plan.
- This water issue is part of the neo-liberal assault on the commons – everything is being commodified for profit.
- Treating people fairly does not mean treating everyone exactly the same. It is important to reach out to those with the least and make sure they are not left behind.

Speaker #2: Identified as a member of 1<sup>st</sup> UU Detroit

- Water department corruption played a role in this issue.
- People have gotten into the habit of not paying their water bill.
- Individuals owe 77 million while corporations owe 24 million
- Should have gone after corporations first before going after people.
- Difficult to reach water department for affordability plans.
- Emergency manager has passed off the responsibility to the mayor. The mayor may choose to extend the moratorium.
- There is a need for accountability in this system.
- Many factors are involved here. The city botched the wake-up call.
- Amnesty should be granted to those who show a legitimate inability to pay.

Speaker #2: Identified as a member of the Central Alliance Church

- Water is a human right necessary for life.
- DTE cannot shut off gas in the winter time.
- Accessible clean water is the right – we cannot get clean water from the river.

Speaker #3: Representative of the ACLU

- The real question is do people have the right to affordable water?
- There are many cities across the country that are under emergency management.
- Detroit is shrinking population-wise
- 40% of Detroit's population lives below the poverty line.
- Infrastructure is aging.
- The shrinking population that is overwhelmingly below the poverty line is forced to pay the cost for infrastructure improvements on a system that is too large to support.
- An affordability plan must be based on the ability to pay.
- This will allow the poor to continue to live in the city.
- Urban centers across the state face this same problem.

Speaker #4: Founding Member of People's Water Board

- A primary concern is with how shut-offs were handled; appeared to be an attack on the people.
- No sense of relationship to humanity.
- Went to United Nations to file a complaint – should have been unnecessary.
- Messaging around this issue is trying to blame those with the least resources.
- Discrimination of affordability.
- Water is the new oil – commodification is intentional.
- Part of a larger, international issue of privatization.

Speaker #5: Lawyer on the Water Class Action Law Suit

- This is part of the cycle of history.
- Water is publicly owned by the public trust doctrine.
- All water in Michigan belongs to all people.
- We are paying for the service of bringing filtered water to your tap.
- Not paying for the water itself; paying for the service.

Speaker #6: Member of 1<sup>st</sup> UU Church

- Water, medical care, and a roof over one's head are necessities and should be available to everyone.
- People are unable to pay their water bills because of the banks and politicians.
- There is a collective ability to pay for water service; if not an individual ability.

**Issue #2: Should there be a moratorium on shut-offs for low income Detroiters?:**

Speaker #7: Wayne State University PHd candidate

- Human rights are understood now to apply to corporations as well as to individuals.
- The water shut offs have disproportionately impacted Detroit compared to the suburbs.
- Rates are the same in the city as they are in the suburbs – even though Detroit sells water to the suburbs who then retail to their customers.
- Water shut-offs are not equitable distributed between Detroiters and their suburban counterparts.
- This situation is similar to Belle Isle where people from the suburbs enjoy the benefits without paying into the upkeep of the system.
- A moratorium is necessary; and this time should be used to reach out to people for education and payment plans.

Speaker #8: Member of 1<sup>st</sup> UU Detroit and medical professional

- The commons (commonly owned resources) need to be addressed jointly.
- At its core this is a public health issue.
- Poor sanitation is how everyone is impacted by and part of this issue.
- There is a very concrete impact to be had resultant of illness and public health threats.

Speaker #9: Member of 1<sup>st</sup> UU Detroit

- Water is a Michigan collective human right.
- There has been no true moratorium, shut-offs have continued through the supposed moratorium.
- Need to ask for the city to actually START the moratorium.

- The moratorium acts as a great time for the city to figure out how to handle this issue.
- The city needs to deal with running water in vacant homes and leaking fire hydrants before going after individuals.

Speaker #10: Member of 1<sup>st</sup> UU Detroit, resident of Ferndale

- Outrageous bills in Ferndale as a result of DWSD error took hours to correct.
- Suburbs buy water service for a rate set by a federal court; it is not an option to bargain for a lower rate.

Speaker #4: Founding Member of People's Waterboard

- We also need to ask ourselves the question of do we need to turn the water back on? The moratorium only prevents new shut offs.
- Detroiters pay retail for water while suburbs pay wholesale; suburbs then set the rate they retail water for. Higher rates are paid by residents in the city of Detroit than by residents of suburbs.
- Payment plans are often violated by DWSD.
- Water is often turned off in buildings where tenants are living and the landlord failed to pay the bill on behalf of the tenant.
- Public health crisis is real.
- Water is god given, and we are stewards of the water.
- This is a humanitarian issue that needs to be addressed in a way that connects with humanity and takes away the business aspect. If the department we addressing this humanely the response would look very different.

Speaker #5: Lawyer on the Water Class Action Law Suit

- It's your water; you are being charged to have it pumped to you.
- Propose a system where you get your first 10,000 gallons of water free. Beyond that you pay.
- Water in question comes from Lake Huron; if there are issues with the pump or meter water should not be shut off until those issues are fixed.

Speaker #11: Director of MUUSJN

- Water is a worldwide issue. Water is a human right.
- Have put forth 3-4 demands on the city:
  - DWSD needs to stop mass water shutoffs and restore water to vulnerable populations.
  - DWSD is planning on increasing rates: there is a need for protections for vulnerable and poor populations.
  - A true water affordability plan must be in place that includes protections for the most vulnerable populations.

Speaker #3: Representative of the ACLU

- What we are really talking about is the cost of providing treated water with sewage.
- Abandonment of urban centers has impacted this issue significantly.
- Between 1977- 2009 federal funding for water fell by 75%
- Additional burden is added to individual users which equates to a very regressive tax.
- The federal government abandoned its responsibility to make water affordable.

**Issue #3: Is there an affordability plan? Is it truly affordable and accessible?**

Speaker #12: member of 1<sup>st</sup> UU Detroit

- Is there an example of a city that is doing this right?

Speaker #4: Founding Member of People's Water Board

- There is an affordability plan that was written by an expert and was passed by city council, but was never put in place.
- The class action law suit intends to enforce the affordability plan being implemented.
- Plan is not accessible; limited information dissemination that was not easily understandable.
- Included a voluntary \$.50 to help people pay water bills; the whereabouts of that money is currently unknown.
- Department of Human services was shut down with no clear plan to deal with the people whose water is being shut off; no plan to assess ability to pay.
- Shut-offs process did not consider affordability and notification.
- Shut-offs went through contractors who conducted themselves inhumanely.
- People's water was shut off days before their shut-off notices indicated.

Speaker #9: Member of 1<sup>st</sup> UU Detroit

- Many families did not receive notification of the shut-offs in Spanish, despite known language barrier. It is important to make this information available to families who do not speak English.

Speaker #3: Representative of the ACLU

- Examples of cities who have successfully implemented affordability plans include Cleveland.
- A set amount of water is provided at no cost to low income people.
- There is no truly affordable water in Detroit.
- It is inhumane to institute shut-offs with no plan for affordability.

Speaker #13: Minister of Northwest UU

- There are examples of cities around the world where water was privatized.
- Poor people were cut off from the water supply.
- Water was then made co-op; we can look to these examples as options.

Speaker #9: Member of 1<sup>st</sup> UU Detroit

- DWSD is planning an affordability fair for August 2 where people have the option to pay their bill or to make payment arrangements.
- The downtown office will be closed that day; due to poor publicity for the faire there is concern that people may not know about the office closure and may attempt to go to the office to find it closed.
- The resources on the DWSD website have no money left to support people trying to turn water back on.

Speaker #5: Lawyer on the Water Class Action Law Suit

- It's our water; we as a group own it.
- Water is a human right as defined by the northwest ordinance.
- We pay for the pumping; including pumping sewage.
- Option to die of typhus while holding to libertarian values; or consider what a community needs.

Speaker #6: Member of 1<sup>st</sup> UU Detroit

- Let's take a look at this from a practical side.
- We are condemning old houses in Detroit in record numbers.
- The city is forcing people who buy homes to rehabilitate them to pay back water bills based on a missing meter or leaking pipes: all things that occurred before the person bought the house.
- We are forcing the money issue on people who were screwed over by big corporations.
- City needs people to occupy homes – should not hit up people who buy homes to rehab them; this is driving people out of the city. This is an issue of mismanagement from the administration downtown.
- The point is not people refusing to pay.
- Water shut-offs cause illnesses, drive people out, it is overall a bad practical plan regardless of ethics.

**Issue #4: What is the impact of water shutoffs on low income customers? On neighborhoods? On the region?**

Speaker #13: Member of 1<sup>st</sup> UU Detroit

- Detroit is a city abandoned. This water issue is part of what is spurring interest in retaking the city.

- Hope is for national attention being directed towards the positive things that are happening in Detroit.

Speaker #9: Member of 1<sup>st</sup> UU Detroit

- There is an issue of racism at play with the water shut-offs.
- 20 houses within 2 blocks were shut-off on the same day.
- Part of the shut-off procedure includes painting a blue line in front of the house on the sidewalk; this can be seen as a shaming of the people inside.
- DWSD needs more accountability; rudeness is part of the culture.

Speaker #4: Founding Member of People's Water Board

- This process has been very focused on shaming people.
- People have been redirecting money from other necessities (rent, food, medication) in order to pay their water bills.
- The water board has been taking this payment as proof that families are able to pay.
- Cash assistance cut-offs mean people are unable to manage financially.

Speaker #3: Representative of the ACLU

- Long term ramifications of the shut-offs is that it improve the bottom line for prospective buyers of DWSD.
- Emergency manager is evaluating proposals to purchase DWSD.
- Detroit will not have a vote in what happens to its water department, which can be sold by someone who was never elected without calling for a vote.
- Privatization effort in Ohio was denied with a 70% 'no' vote.
- If DWSD is privatized then suburbs will also experience higher rates.
- Customers are shareholders of public utilities; that is not the case with privately owned.

Speaker #7: Wayne State University PhD candidate

- Water at the speaker's home was shut off in February after the department did not process a payment on time.
- Management at DWSD is insane and bad for people trying to pay bills.
- The water shut-offs have brought people with a social justice orientation together.

Speaker #5: Lawyer on the Water Class Action Law Suit

- This is a part of the age of neo-liberalism.
- Chapter 9 means anyone can buy an organization and strip its obligations.
- This is part of a structural readjustment.

- Demonstrations were not anticipated by the city.
- In this meeting we are in the process of finding things we can say to others who disagree with us to win them over to our side.
- Paradigm change is coming soon.

Conclusion: Sharon Mills

Thank you to everyone for your comments and insights. Moving into Part 2.

Part 2: Facilitated by Rev. Roger Mohr

**Where do we go from here?**

What is our consensus?

What action do we want from DWSD?

What action do we want from our city and state Government?

How can we reach a regional consensus?

What is our voice as a faith community?

It is our consensus that water shut-offs should be stopped, and service should be turned back on until DWSD gets its act together. In defining 'getting its act together' we determined:

DWSD must improve its service:

- The water department behaved less than justly; and needs to be held accountable in the future.
- Processing bills and payments, and sending out shut-off notifications in a timely manner.
- Information needs to be provided in a comprehensible format including translations.
- Water cannot be turned off to a residence until any disputes are resolved

Affordability plans must be in place

- Affordability plans need to be revisited and reworked, and then properly implemented.
- DWSD needs to be held accountable for implementation.
- Any affordability plan should be based on legal, national, and international standards.
- Any affordability plan needs to evaluate an individual's ability to pay.

Privatization must be avoided.

The strategic solution must address regional concerns of water issues.

- Everyone must take part in paying for the infrastructure upgrades that benefit the whole region; this support must not simply come from Detroit residents.

Conclusion and thank you for coming: Sharon Mills



The meeting adjourned at 9:30pm.