



July 7, 2020

Board of Directors  
Metropolitan Water District of Southern California  
P.O. Box 54153  
Los Angeles, CA 90054-0153

**Re: MWD General Manager Recruitment and Hiring Process**

Dear Board of Directors:

We hope this letter finds you safe in these difficult times. On behalf of Sierra Club California and our more than 500,000 members and supporters statewide, thousands of whom reside in Metropolitan Water District's (MWD) service area, we write to offer the following comments on MWD's General Manager (GM) recruitment and hiring process.

For more than 34 years, Sierra Club California has led legislative and regulatory advocacy in California for the Sierra Club, a national conservation organization founded in 1892. Our members, supporters, and staff are well-versed in California's efforts to develop and implement smart, equitable water policies that support our communities and economy while also protecting the state's precious environment. And with this knowledge and experience, we routinely participate in the necessary public processes and forums that can yield resilient and sustainable water management policies for all Californians.

With the upcoming retirement of the current GM, we believe MWD has an opportunity to produce these policies, beginning with the selection of a successive GM whose recruitment and hiring is the result of public engagement and collaboration. Such a GM could usher in an innovative era for the agency, benefitting not only those in MWD's service area, but California as a whole.

However, in reviewing your discussions on the proposed recruitment and hiring process, there is no mention of public engagement in any of the decision-making processes, no opportunity for public comment on the candidates, and very little transparency about the qualifications that the Board is seeking, or the questions that will be asked in interviews. With the gravity of the decisions made by the next GM, the potential lengthy tenure of the individual in that position, and the uncertain, tenuous future of California water supply, it is imperative that the public is involved in the hiring process. Engaging with residents is not only the most ethical choice, it also provides buy-in, collaboration, and reflects community values.

Additionally, the transition to a new GM presents the board a timely opportunity to consider the future direction of MWD in light of changes that have occurred since the last hiring of a GM 15 years ago.

Either concurrent with this hiring process, or upon the hiring of a new GM, the board should intentionally review how to restructure its water delivery policies to take into account the uncertainties of Northern California water availability due to the effects of climate change; the high costs of continued dependence on declining Northern California river water; the advancement of technologies and strategies that support expanding Southern California conservation, efficiency, groundwater cleanup, stormwater capture, and water recycling; the economic realities in a COVID and post-COVID state; and the need to ensure equitable affordability of drinking water, among other issues.

### **Transparent Community Engagement and Collaboration**

As a public agency operating on public funds, it is imperative that Californians are accorded transparency and involvement throughout the recruitment and hiring process. We strongly urge the Board to hold public listening sessions before the process and qualifications are set and the Executive search firm is selected. These listening sessions will give the public an opportunity to ensure that the next GM is committed to the values of Southern California residents, values that include promoting efficient water conservation, providing affordable access to safe and clean potable water, and committing to equity for all. Southern Californians have no desire to destroy any part of California's ecosystem, or leave any region in California in economic and public distress due to poor planning and water management resulting in public health calamities, especially given the current political and economic climate and ongoing climate crisis.

Additionally, a robust public engagement process is necessary for MWD to return to collaborative approaches the district largely employed in the 1990's and early 2000's. During this period, MWD routinely sought input from ratepayers, community groups, environmental justice organizations, and conservation organizations. But over the past 15 years, MWD has effectively abandoned collaboration much less, particularly with public interest groups. Research from the Sustainable Cities Institute found that engaging with communities creates "the ability to generate new ideas, develop customized solutions, and modify individual behavior to accept change. Early and sustained public involvement can provide cost and time savings, ... better, more durable achievement of project goals, and more effective use of community assets." Public engagement provides a two-way flow of information, enhances public support, and builds trust. Hiring a GM committed to collaborative approaches to management must be a priority.

### **Water Supply and Management**

California's water availability has decreased due to the ongoing impacts of the climate crisis. It is key that MWD reassess how the agency will address this fact and continue providing water to an increasing population. We strongly urge the Board to seek a GM that can innovatively tackle the issue of water reliability and security without forsaking California's natural environment. The new GM must be an advocate for sustainable water solutions that are local, environmentally beneficial, less costly, energy efficient, carbon-neutral, and reduce the need to import large quantities of water from other areas of the state that are already in decline, specifically the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

To that end, the new GM must be an individual that is willing to look for alternatives to large-scale, environmentally destructive projects that are inconsistent with state law and policy, such as the proposed single tunnel Delta Conveyance Project. Continued focus on investing in a Delta conveyance perpetuates an antiquated approach to water delivery that is costly but does not guarantee a reliable source of water, let alone any new water. The Board must take this opportunity to seek out a GM that will use technology and other strategies to source more water locally and sustainably from projects including stormwater capture, and greener landscaping. Moreover, investment in local projects yields the creation of local jobs. As a public agency, any chance to provide local economic development should be a priority for MWD.

## **Equity and Water Affordability**

As Californians are in the throes of a deep recession and mass unemployment, and communities are becoming more and more critical of racial inequity and its environmental justice implications, we strongly urge the Board to prioritize the hiring of a GM that understands the social and economic implications of MWD actions. As recently as 2.5 months ago, in April 2020, amidst a global pandemic, this Board voted to increase water rates over the next two years and devote \$50 million for Delta tunnel project planning purposes. Moreover, the construction of the tunnel project is estimated to cost \$11-15 billion before inflation and cost overruns. Much of this expense will be borne by MWD ratepayers. Low-income residents, renters, and communities of color will be hit the hardest, but will receive no benefits.

MWD ratepayers deserve a GM that will not increase water rates for unnecessary vanity projects. The GM must commit to providing an equitable, reliable, and sustainable alternative to the status quo.

We respectfully urge you to reframe the GM recruitment and hiring process to incorporate and implement the suggestions above. Doing so would demonstrate that MWD is committed to providing member water agencies and their ratepayers with a transparent sustainable, and equitable water delivery system.

We look forward to working with you in this process.

Sincerely,

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