

Michigan

DEQ removed plan for corrosion control of Flint water, leading to crisis

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The city of Flint's blueprint for treating Flint River water in 2014 included corrosion controls that could have prevented the **Flint water crisis** from ever happening.

But harried and short-handed water plant employees abandoned plans to add phosphates to the water after at least two state Department of Environmental Quality officials advised them it wasn't necessary.

In an interview with MLive before he was charged with tampering with evidence and willful neglect of duty in April, Flint Utilities Administrator Mike Glasgow said he was surprised by the explicit direction he was given by Adam Rosenthal and Mike Prysby of the DEQ.

But Glasgow said he pushed forward with other preparations without resisting the direction from the state because he had so much else to do and so little time to put the plant into operation by the target date his superiors set.

"It was like a fire drill every day" with a to-do list that seemed impossible to achieve, said Glasgow, who believed the activity at the plant was a ruse — nothing more than a negotiating tool to force the city of Detroit to lower the price of treated water it had been selling to Flint for decades.

It wasn't until a few days before the plant began treating and distributing river water — over objections raised in writing by Glasgow — that the plant operator realized "we were really going to switch over."

"I'm thinking, holy sh--. We're really doing it," he said.

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A year ago, Gov. Rick Snyder was stoking rumors of a presidential bid as a metrics-driven Republican whose ability to run government like a business transformed a troubled state.

The lack of corrosion control in Flint's water treatment process was a critical error in creating a nationally recognized lead contamination emergency in Flint.

Left untreated, the corrosive river water damaged aging transmission pipes and indoor plumbing, and the percentage of young children with elevated blood lead levels in Flint nearly doubled.

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DEQ spokeswoman Mel Brown declined a request from MLive to interview Prysby or Rosenthal and declined to comment about Glasgow's remarks "because of the ongoing investigations and litigation."

Prysby, a district engineer for the state, and Stephen Busch, a district manager within the DEQ's drinking water division, also were charged with crimes for their roles in the crisis on April 20.

Glasgow's emails to Rosenthal in 2014 included a warning the city was not prepared to put the water plant into full-time service â concerns that Glasgow described to the state Legislature's Joint Committee on the Flint Water Public Health Emergency late last month.

The utilities director told MLive in advance of his testimony that representatives of Lockwood, Andrews & Newman, the city's contract engineer at the plant, were active in discussions with the DEQ in the time leading up to treating the river water. LAN, an engineering firm based in Houston, was hired on a \$171,000 contract by Flint's state-appointed emergency manager Ed Kurtz in summer 2013.

Five months before the water plant was put into operation, Kurtz's successor, Darnell Earley, signed a massive change order, increasing the contract to \$1.1 million.

LAN agreed to provide additional services to the city, including final design work, construction engineering and "necessary regulatory submittals to operate the water plant off the river until the KWA water source is completed."

A spokesman for LAN issued a statement in response to questions from MLive, saying the company "was asked to provide a limited scope of engineering services to address specific components of the existing water treatment plant, not the overall water quality."

"The actual tasks are set forth in the public contract between the parties. The systems we provided services on are operating without issue, and it is clear that LAN provided these specific services in a responsible and appropriate manner in accordance with industry standards," the LAN statement says.

"Decisions concerning corrosion control were made by the city and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality and not by LAN. LAN continues to assist the city of Flint as it addresses the various water issues confronting the city today."

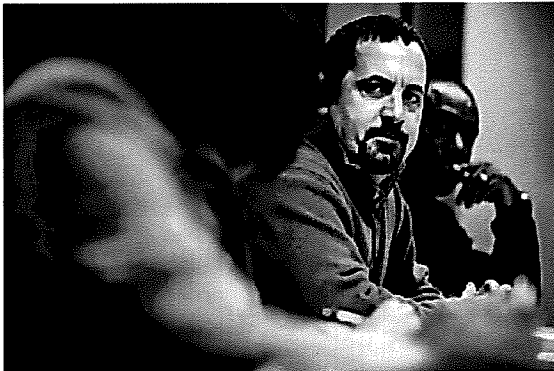
Glasgow told former Flint Department of Public Works director Howard Croft in an Aug. 31, 2015, email that phosphates were included in plans that LAN developed.

Croft also said in a Sept. 3, 2015, email to DEQ officials that "optimization for lead was addressed and discussed with the engineering firm and with the DEQ" before the city water plant went into full-time service.

"It was determined that having more data was advisable prior to the commitment of a specific optimization method," the email said. "Most chemicals used in this process are phosphate based and phosphate can be a 'food' for bacteria."

Glasgow told the special state legislative committee investigating the Flint water crisis that he regrets not having slowed down the process of putting the plant into service.

"I did have some concerns and misgivings at first but, as I look back, I relied on engineers and state regulators to kind of direct the decisions," he said.



Flint water supervisor warned state of problems before switch to river

Just eight days before the city started using the Flint River as its water source, a treatment plant supervisor warned state regulators of a potential disaster on the horizon.

Although DEQ employees declined comment to MLive, they were interviewed by the Flint Water Advisory Task Force.

Eric Rothstein, a national water issues consultant and principal at the Galardi Rothstein Group, said the group never got a clear answer as to why the DEQ didn't require corrosion control.

"We asked the question and there was no compelling response," Rothstein said. "Frankly, there's not a good explanation. I think there was a lack of understanding about the potential consequences, and perhaps indifference."

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MLive staff reporter Julie Mack contributed to this report.

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