March 10, 2015

Board of Commissioners
Lansing Board of Water & Light
830 E. Hazel Street
Lansing, MI 48901

Cc: Mayor Virg Bernero; George Stojic, BWL Exec. Director of Strategic Planning and Development; and Lansing City Council Members: Tina Houghton, Carol Wood, A’Lynne Boles, Kathie Dunbar, Vincent Delgado, Judi Brown Clarke, Jody Washington, and Jessica Yorko

Dear Commissioners,

The undersigned health professionals and health organizations write regarding the crucial hiring process now underway for the next General Manager of the BWL. We respectfully ask you to seek a professional who not only has strong credentials to ensure financial health for the utility; we also urge you to consider how that person can be a leader toward fulfilling BWL’s responsibility to protect the health of people across Greater Lansing. With this in mind, we present two requests: 1) that the board includes interview questions that will illuminate a candidate’s understanding of the BWL’s community-wide health impacts, and 2) that the BWL as a business entity consider adopting a Health in All Policies (HiAP) approach to operational decisions.

Despite substantive strides toward expanding your renewable energy portfolio, your energy production fleet relies upon two coal-fired power plants, Eckert and Erickson Stations. Coal-fired power plants emit a variety of pollutants, including particulate matter (PM2.5), mercury, sulfur dioxide and arsenic. Eckert is by far the largest emitter of these pollutants in Ingham County and is responsible for over 60% of all air emissions in the county.¹

Both power plants’ emissions pose a health risk to our community: Exposure to PM2.5 has been consistently linked with increased mortality from cardiopulmonary diseases, lung cancer,² and numerous other respiratory illnesses, in particular, asthma. People with asthma are highly sensitive to the pollutants produced by coal-fired power plants like Eckert and Erickson. In fact, Ingham County has a higher rate of asthma than the state does. Because all asthma triggers are additive,³ we can say with certainty that coal burning plants in Mid-Michigan contribute to asthma exacerbations, which can lead to needless, costly hospitalizations and premature death.

The following data further demonstrates the urgent need for a BWL leader who will address the need to reduce the harmful emissions from outdated systems at the Eckert and Erickson plants:⁴

- From 2004 through 2010, the asthma hospitalization rate in Mid-Michigan was consistently higher than the state rate.
- Going back to at least 1990, the childhood asthma hospitalization rate in the region has been two to three times the statewide rate.

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¹ MDEQ Michigan Air Emissions Reporting System
² Cohen et al., 2005; Pope et al., 2002
³ Rosenstreich, 2014
• As a chronic disease, asthma disproportionately affects African-Americans and other minorities in Michigan. The asthma hospitalization rate for African American residents in Mid-Michigan since before 1990 has been between two and five times the rate for White residents in the region.
• The zip codes of 48933 (Downtown Lansing) and 48911 and 48910 (South Lansing) have the highest hospitalization rates in the region, which are double the state rate.
• Most Lansing zip codes have asthma hospitalization rates that exceed the state rate.
• From 2010 to 2012, there was an increase in the asthma death rate both in Michigan and Mid-Michigan.

The Board of Water & Light prides itself on being owned by the people of Lansing and is undoubtedly an active presence in Greater Lansing’s community. Your slogan “Hometown People. Hometown Power.” concisely demonstrates the benefits of a municipally-owned utility, one where customers as owners can benefit from the lowest electric rates in the state and still maintain high reliability. Being owned by your customers charges you with a unique obligation that extends beyond economic concerns. It means you also owe your customers the opportunity to live in a physical and social environment that allows for health, well-being, and equity.

Our hope is that the new General Manager will be someone who acts as a leader to improve the quality of life in our community – not just through financial incentives, but also by incorporating potential public health impacts into the decision-making process. We would like to request that a candidate’s vision for BWL’s health impacts on the Greater Lansing area be included in the interview process. This will benefit the BWL, while also showing what a strong steward it can be for the people you serve.

In regard to our second request, recently the Ingham County Board of Health adopted a resolution in support of a Health In All Policies (HiAP) approach to decision making in Ingham County Government. This approach sets standards, goals, and procedures to improve health and equity in everyday operations, capital outlays, and budget modifications. We support the Ingham County Board of Health in their resolution to implement HiAP, and we see a valuable opportunity for BWL to adopt a similar approach. This will begin the process of evaluating ways in which your policies and business practices promote or deter healthy work and living conditions, especially for our more vulnerable residents.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter with you in more depth. Please contact us with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

The MI Air MI Health Coalition

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