



Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago

President's Annual Message 2021: A Year in Review



As the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) looks to a brighter new year, we have continued to exceed expectations during the second year of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Not only did we deliver essential services – transforming wastewater into clean water, managing stormwater, improving our waterways and drinking water source, and recovering resources – but during the pandemic, we played an integral role in studying the coronavirus.

For a second year, we sent samples from our treatment collection to four different studies to gain a better understanding of the virus detection in wastewater. These sewage surveillance studies measure traces or fragments of the RNA genetic material of the SARS-CoV-2 virus to track the spread of COVID-19. This information is used by public health departments to make decisions for controlling the spread of the virus instead of depending on information from clinical cases, which is only available after the fact. All seven MWRD water reclamation plants (WRPs) were selected to provide samples to local and national research institutions, universities and public health departments and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

As always, our staff continued to work 24/7 to maintain reliable service levels and deliver peace of mind to the residents of Cook County. As another year concludes and we reflect on our achievements, I am grateful for everyone's service, health and clean water.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kari K. Steele".

Kari K. Steele
President of the Board of Commissioners

Strategic Plan

A robust collaborative strategic planning process that occurred over nine months in 2021 culminated with the Board's approval of a landmark document to guide the MWRD's efforts to protect the region's water environment and enhance the quality of life for area residents. The MWRD's Strategic Plan 2021-2025 was approved on June 3, 2021, following a process that utilized public participation, a steering committee and engagement with local government agencies and consultants. The plan articulates the vision and strategic goals for the MWRD, identifies strategic initiatives to achieve those goals, and provides a framework for measuring progress. All aspects of the strategic planning process are informed by an equity lens. The MWRD Steering Committee remained cognizant that the planning has a deep impact on all residents no matter where they live or work in the MWRD's 882-square-mile service area. As a result, we focused on diversity, equity and inclusion to guide engagement with all communities across Cook County. It was an honor to work with our executive leadership, staff, commissioners, volunteers and the public to create a living, breathing document that is now helping to guide our work.

Financial Health Buoys Success

Despite the uncertain times of a global pandemic, we continued our streak of delivering reliable, informative, responsible and transparent budgets and annual reports that mark a healthy financial state of affairs. The Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) of the United States and Canada honored the MWRD in April with the Distinguished Budget Presentation Award for the 2020 Budget and Certificates of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting to the MWRD, the MWRD Retirement Fund and the MWRD Retiree Health Care Trust for 2019 Annual Reports. The MWRD has received the Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting for a remarkable 45 consecutive years, placing the MWRD in the top two percent of governments receiving a consecutive award. The MWRD Retirement Fund and the MWRD Retiree Health Care Trust have received the Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting for 27 and 13 consecutive years, respectively. The certificates provide assurance to the MWRD Board of Commissioners, management, investors, regulators, rating agencies, citizens and others that the MWRD's financial condition and operations are fairly presented. Equally as impressive, the MWRD has received the Distinguished Budget Presentation Award for 36 consecutive years.

In September, Fitch Ratings Agency again affirmed the MWRD's AAA credit rating for its stability. Fitch Ratings credited the MWRD for its reliable revenue streams, low operating costs, and an improving debt leverage ratio.

Fitch Ratings further noted that the MWRD has managed to stay afloat during turbulent and unpredictable economic times. We are grateful for this AAA credit affirmation that gives our taxpayers the confidence that we remain strong financial stewards of their tax dollars, carrying forth low risks and strong reserves to give our water environment the frontline protection it deserves. In addition, we are working toward stabilizing our pension system by reserving and budgeting \$30 million of the Corporate Fund Balance as an excess contribution to the Pension Fund in the proposed 2022 budget.

Protecting Our Water Environment

Without that financial backbone, we could not fulfill our daily tasks of transforming more than a billion gallons of wastewater into clean water each day. A testament to our steady, reliable and essential services, our hard-working staff again earned national recognition from the National Association of Clean Water Agencies. We received Platinum Peak Performance Awards for at least five consecutive years of meeting 100 percent compliance of National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permits at six MWRD water reclamation plants (WRPs), including the Calumet WRP, which earned platinum honors for meeting full compliance for 29 consecutive years. Despite the pandemic, our team continues to meet the challenge of protecting the water environment.

Persevering in a Time of National Crisis

My fellow commissioners and I passed a resolution saluting Dr. Ngozi O. Ezike, MD, director of the Illinois Department of Public Health, in celebration of the contributions of African Americans during Black History Month. Spearheaded by Vice President Barbara McGowan, it was one of many highlights of a month-long celebration. The MWRD held a flag raising ceremony and created daily videos from commissioners and staff highlighting African Americans, in support of this year's theme titled: "Persevering in a Time of National Crisis." This theme was selected to acknowledge the resiliency of African American people and their ability to achieve greatness.

Women's History Event

We also celebrated the contributions of women in our workplace this year through a virtual Women's History Month forum in March. U.S. Rep. Robin Kelly (IL-02) served as our guest speaker, and six honorees representing an array of professions at the MWRD shared their personal pathways to success: Principal Civil Engineer Junli Bai, Laborer Foreman Lucy Wilson Cunningham, Managing Engineer Kathy Lai, Senior Civil Engineer Lolita Thompson, Diversity Officer Malisa Torres, and Assistant Director of Monitoring and Research Jennifer Wasik.

Juneteenth

In recognition of the importance of Juneteenth, a holiday commemorating the emancipation of African American slaves in the United States, District staff were given the option to use June 19 as a holiday selection for the first time. The day symbolizes freedom, achievement, and racial equality.

Latinx Heritage Month

The MWRD celebrated Latinx Heritage Month in October with a Virtual Business Roundtable and a Stewardship event at Possum Hollow Woods coordinated by Chairman of Finance Marcelino Garcia and Commissioner Eira Corral Sepúlveda in coordination with the Office of Public Affairs. The roundtable welcomed 80 participants to learn how to do business with the MWRD. Panelists included representatives from the Illinois Hispanic Chamber of Commerce; INDEP Chicago Consulting; and the Hispanic American Construction Industry Association. Coordinated in partnership with the Forest Preserve District of Cook County and volunteers from Trinity Christian College, the stewardship event involved controlled burns to help clean up the area from invasive vegetation.

Remembering Terry O'Brien

Former MWRD President Terrence J. O'Brien left a lasting imprint throughout many chapters of a life dedicated to his family, community, public service and improving the region's water environment. After a lengthy illness, President O'Brien died on Feb. 28. He was 64. His father and grandfather worked at the North Side WRP in Skokie, and by the time Terry left after 24 years of service as an MWRD commissioner and President of the Board, the facility bore his name. President O'Brien was elected to his first of three six-year terms as a commissioner in 1988. He was elected by his fellow commissioners as president in 1997 and re-elected president eight times.

Commissioner Debra Shore joins U.S. EPA

President Joe Biden appointed Commissioner Debra Shore to serve as Regional Administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region 5. Besides Illinois, other states in this region include Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin, 35 tribal nations and the Great Lakes. In honor of Debra's nearly 15 years on the MWRD Board, we presented her with a resolution honoring her steadfast service to protecting the water environment and strengthening the quality of life for 5.25 million residents in the MWRD service area.

"Where Does IT Go?"

We answered the question of where everything that is flushed or poured down the sink goes in our children's storybook "Where Does IT Go?" and its accompanying

animation. The book is available in four languages and the animation is available in three languages. The book explores how the MWRD protects the water environment and discusses the many career opportunities in the water sector.

Restore the Canopy

After a year off due to the pandemic, we relaunched our Restore the Canopy program this spring to revitalize the area oak tree population and help absorb stormwater. Since 2016, the MWRD has distributed more than 97,000 free saplings. Not only do trees provide a beautiful green canopy for our communities, they also serve as a powerful and effective form of green infrastructure to help absorb stormwater. A video created by the MWRD featuring Commissioner Cam Davis highlights the value of trees.

EQ Compost

In our quest to recover and reuse resources, we discovered new partners in sustainability. We distributed our Class A exceptional quality biosolids product for new applications, spreading on farms, golf courses, parks while studying how biosolids and EQ Compost can transform brownfields into lush, fertile green space throughout our region. We also continued the bring your own bucket program at our WRPs and used our compost to restore soil and promote urban farming. A new partnership with Southside Blooms initiated by Commissioner Kim Du Buclet demonstrated that EQ Compost can increase flower production, improve the regional ecosystem, promote changes in our economy and land use, and improve Cook County by revitalizing communities with jobs and beautiful sunflowers.

Seeds of Solidarity

To celebrate Asian and Pacific Islander American Heritage Month this year, MWRD Commissioners Josina Morita and Mariyana Spyropoulos distributed specially designed seeded bookmarks to schools in Chicago's Asian American community. Once planted and blooming, the flowers will serve as a reminder that there is no room for hate and that we must all stand together to support our diverse community. The MWRD also honored elected Asian American women.

Pride Flag Raising

We raised the Pride flag at all seven of our WRPs this year in addition to the main office building complex. The rainbow striped flag is associated with the movement for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights and is a widely recognized emblem of equality and inclusion. We have championed the LGBTQIA+ community by adopting fair treatment policies for employees and their domestic partners and their retirement benefits and enacted a policy to promote LGBT small business enterprises.

Save the Monarchs

In partnership with the Illinois Monarch Project, more than 3,000 people took a pledge to save the monarch butterfly population and we distributed 9,800 packets of milkweed seeds. We also established monarch waystations at our water reclamation plants. The butterfly population has rapidly declined due to habitat loss and climate change resulting from development, poor land management practices, and heavy reliance on pesticides and herbicides. Milkweed, the sole source of food for monarch caterpillars, provides benefits to the monarchs and supports the MWRD's role in managing stormwater. The deep roots of these native plants can absorb more water while lessening the amount of pesticides and herbicides to improve area water quality.

Odor Control Improvements

We are committed to being a responsive neighbor, so addressing odors continues to be a top priority. This year we made substantial investments toward reducing odors from the wastewater treatment process, including the completion of \$17 million in upgrades at Stickney WRP where we are constructing new infrastructure and have replaced aging infrastructure with better air filtration systems, and neutralized odors with new misting systems and biofilters. We also speak with residents living near the Calumet WRP to address their concerns as well. When the Thornton Composite Reservoir went live in 2016, staff quickly implemented additional measures to reduce odors from the facility at a cost of approximately \$6.1 million. The investments reduced the number of complaints from South Holland and Thornton from 172 from the first full year of operation, to 63 complaints in 2017, 48 complaints in 2018, 26 in 2019, and zero complaints in 2020. We have continued to meet with residents and business owners from the area to hear their concerns regarding odors emanating from the reservoir, and multiple activities are underway to reduce the odors, such as reinstating manned odor patrols, increasing the number of hydrogen sulfide sensors and performing predictive modeling to determine what additional measures can be taken. It is a top priority for us to reduce odors wherever possible, however, we welcome your help. If you smell something, let us know by reporting it through our Citizens Incident Reporting (CIR) system at mwrdd.org. You can also call our CIR hotline at (800) 332-3867 or download our free CIR app for iOS by searching for "MWRD CIR" on iTunes and submit the report via your mobile phone.

Stormwater Management

In our battle with climate change and increased rainfall concerns, we had a major year of progress building resilient communities and regional protection for Cook

County. We added four flood-prone property acquisition projects and completed the Midlothian Creek Streambank Stabilization Project in Tinley Park. We also completed green alley projects in Broadview, Cicero, Maywood, and River Grove and installed permeable pavement at schools in Thornton and Harwood Heights. The reservoir, along with channel improvements to Addison Creek, cover two associated flood control projects working in tandem to provide benefits to Addison Creek communities such as Bellwood, Northlake, Stone Park, Melrose Park, Westchester and Broadview. The 600-acre-foot Addison Creek Reservoir will hold close to 200 million gallons of storage capacity and connect with the Addison Creek Channel by late 2022.

Tunnel and Reservoir Plan

Despite a relatively dry year in 2021, our Tunnel and Reservoir Plan continued to protect our waterways from pollution and our basements and communities from flooding. We rehabbed three pumps in our Mainstream Pumping Station to give us sufficient infrastructure to manage increasing rain fall. We also inched closer to completing the last live link of tunnel, connecting the Des Plaines Inflow Tunnel between the Des Plaines Tunnel System and the McCook Reservoir. With the gates installed, this inflow tunnel will go online in the coming months.

Space to Grow

In partnership with Openlands, Healthy Schools Campaign, Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago Department of Water Management, we completed five more Space to Grow schoolyard transformations bringing the total to 30 schools since the program began in 2014. The program converts asphalt lots into vibrant and permeable places to play. Each schoolyard can retain 5.6 million gallons of water per rain event. The grand total of storage volume is 5.6 million gallons per rain event, equal to 8.4 Olympic-size pools or 111,108 bathtubs per rain event.

Conclusion

The MWRD has faced its share of unique and not-so-unique challenges since the start of the pandemic. We worked through this difficult time to ensure our services continued thanks to our dedicated staff, commissioners and others who have worked together to help monitor and protect the waterways and manage stormwater for the millions of Cook County residents who rely on our services 24/7/365. We are grateful that you put your trust in the MWRD to live up to its mission and operate by its values.

