



Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago

Press Release

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MWRD facility named in honor of Barbara J. McGowan

Main office building on Erie Street in Chicago dedicated to influential MWRD leader



(L-R); MWRD Chairman of Finance Marcelino Garcia, Commissioner Theresa Flynn, Commissioner Yumeka Brown, Commissioner Mariyana Spyropoulos, President Kari K. Steele, Commissioner Kimberly DuBuclet, Vice President Barbara J. McGowan, Commissioner Eira Corral Sepúlveda and Commissioner Daniel Pogorzelski in front of the Barbara J. McGowan Main Office Building.

A towering figure protecting the region’s water environment for the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) for over three decades now has her name etched on a building in downtown Chicago.

The “Barbara J. McGowan Main Office Building,” 100 E. Erie St., was dedicated on Dec. 8 during a ceremony and plaque unveiling with family, dignitaries, MWRD commissioners and staff following the retirement of Vice President Barbara J. McGowan, who served on the MWRD Board of Commissioners from 1998 to 2022. Guests including Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White and Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot were on hand to give remarks honoring the vice president. The third longest serving Commissioner in the MWRD’s history, Vice President McGowan retired following her last Board of Commissioners’ meeting

on Nov. 17. She was not only the first African American vice president at the MWRD but also served as the first interim African American female president, serving in this capacity in 2012 and 2014.

“I am humbled by this building dedication and the many blessings, well wishes and support I received upon my retirement,” said Vice President McGowan. “I thank our taxpayers and my fellow commissioners and MWRD staff for placing their trust in me and collaborating over all these years to protect public health and our water environment.”

A voice of reason, a defender of the water environment, equal opportunity advocate, promoter of diversity and pillar on the MWRD Board of Commissioners, Vice President McGowan has sought to provide guidance, financial oversight and effective policy *(continued)*

MWRD facility named in honor of Barbara J. McGowan, *cont.*

decisions and procedures during her four terms of office. These actions have helped the MWRD meet its mission in protecting regional water resources, managing stormwater to mitigate flooding and transforming wastewater into clean water for 5.16 million residents from Chicago and 128 surrounding municipalities.

Vice President McGowan's introduction into public service began when she volunteered for the late Chicago Mayor Harold Washington. She served as the office manager of the Political Education Project created by Mayor Washington before being elected for the first time in 1998 to the MWRD Board of Commissioners, going on to serve alongside six executive directors and dozens of commissioners.

In 2004 Vice President McGowan supported state legislation that enabled the MWRD to become the stormwater management authority for Cook County, and along with the Board of Commissioners, unanimously adopted the Watershed Management Ordinance which established uniform stormwater regulations throughout Cook County in 2013.

Under Vice President McGowan's leadership, the MWRD advanced the Tunnel and Reservoir Plan to improve the quality of local waterways and mitigate flooding, and implemented an array of new wastewater treatment technologies, including disinfection facilities at both the Calumet and O'Brien water reclamation plants and the construction of the world's largest nutrient recovery facility at the Stickney Water Reclamation Plant.

Vice President McGowan has been instrumental in ensuring fairness in the workplace and in contracting. She has constantly pushed for inclusive contract-

ing practices and work opportunities for minority and women contractors. With the support of the Board of Commissioners, she took the lead in introducing changes to the MWRD's MBE/WBE/SBE Affirmative Action Ordinance to include penalties for contractors that violate the ordinance. She also served as a trustee on the MWRD Pension Board from 2007 to 2019 and served as chair of the MWRD's Affirmative Action and Procurement committees and vice chair of Budget & Employment; Pension, Human Resources & Civil Service; Public Information & Education; and Real Estate Development committees.

During her tenure, she spearheaded the celebration of African American History Month for the entire month of February and brought together notable speakers to educate and enlighten staff, students and citizens. She also encouraged the MWRD Board of Commissioners to recognize Juneteenth as a holiday. In 2020, she was inducted into the National Civil Rights Hall of Fame at the National Civil Rights Library. A breast cancer survivor, Vice President McGowan also promoted awareness for the disease and support for research and breast cancer patients.

"For three decades Vice President McGowan has been passionate for protecting the water environment," said MWRD President Kari K. Steele. "We owe much to her for her guidance and trailblazing determination to make the MWRD what it is today – a diverse, resilient, committed and thriving workplace. We congratulate Vice President McGowan on an impressive career in water and thank her for her immeasurable contributions to the MWRD. We all have learned from the Vice President and wish her a happy and healthy retirement."

Recovering Resources, Transforming Water