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JAMES A. BOHL, JR.

Alderman, 5th District

Water Works appointment is on the mark

Statement of Alderman Jim Bohl

April 4, 2017

In a letter to Mayor Barrett that has received some media attention, a handful of my Common Council colleagues questioned the appointment of Jennifer Gonda as the new superintendent of the Milwaukee Water Works.

I strongly disagree with that position, and actually I see the appointment of Ms. Gonda (by Ghassan Korban, commissioner of the Department of Public Works) as a bold move that will further enhance Milwaukee's esteemed national reputation in water quality. As chair of the city's Water Quality Task Force, I have the utmost confidence in Ms. Gonda's abilities to guide the Water Works to continuing and greater achievements as a key city asset and critical utility.

The City of Milwaukee is seen as a national model for the upgrades that were made to the Water Works to address the cryptosporidium outbreak in 1993. We currently have national experts working in areas of water chemistry and water quality who are considered among the very best in the country – something that will not change under Ms. Gonda. In speaking with her the other day, I was pleased that Ms. Gonda recognizes the need to sustain this excellence, proposing such things as putting in place successor plans for key employees nearing the twilight of their careers, and finding ways to increase transparency and awareness of what the Water Works is doing on the water quality issue.

Interestingly, I made a request for and was provided with the job announcement for Water Works Superintendent that was used to hire our former MWW superintendent, Carrie Lewis. The qualifications listed include a bachelor's degree in engineering, public administration, urban affairs, economics OR a related field. There was no exclusive requirement for a background in the sciences, and an emphasis (in part) was stressed for a candidate with "excellent administrative and executive skills."

-More-



Page 2

In my view, Ms. Gonda excels in the areas of budget, finance, business administration, human resources and intergovernmental relations. She checks many of these boxes to a very high degree, and even more importantly has extensive experience working with suburban officials and economic development /business leaders as the head of the city's Intergovernmental Relations Division.

Ms. Gonda has been at the forefront of a number of key policy issues for the city and will, I believe, be a catalyst for utilizing and maximizing the human talent in the department. I also believe she will look for and lead reforms that will make the Water Works run better.

Years ago I recall an executive change at the Milwaukee Public Museum that drew some head scratching before the new officer even had his name on the door because, while a sound administrator, he had no experience in the museum business. In short order he was credited with turning around a financial shortfall and correcting numerous internal issues. Not surprising to me, when that executive decided to move on from the position, no one questioned when the reigns next went to a bank president. In the end, those outside-the-box executives helped turn the museum's fortunes around with key strengths in administration and finance. Their work and leadership did not undermine the strengths of the museum and the public's affection for and interest in it.

In a similar fashion, I believe Ms. Gonda's strengths will strengthen – not undermine – public confidence in the tremendous asset that is the Milwaukee Water Works.

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