

Former GM has strong words for sewer district

BY CHARLOTTE TWINE
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KEY LARGO — The former general manager of the Key Largo Wastewater Treatment District last week warned that the district is experiencing a "brain drain" that could compromise future performance if not addressed.

Current General Manager Paul Christian, however,

says ex-manager Margaret Blank is way off base.

Blank wrote an open letter to the commissioners of the board and posted it on her blog. "The Real Poop," in response to the article, "Tobin walks out of sewer district meeting" in the Oct. 28 edition of the Free Press.

Her blog post, "District

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Drama Makes Me Sad, referred to Commissioner Andy Tobin's walking out as "theatrics" but added that "his walking out really is a symptom of a deteriorating situation" involving staffing at the district's treatment plant.

"Tobin has tried to address the 'brain drain' by proposing the use of an operating company [Severn Trent Environmental Services] to run the treatment plant and collection system," Blank wrote. "Right now, this is the only solution on the table. Tobin and [Robby] Majeska seem to be the only commissioners paying any attention to the problem. The other three need to stop getting distracted by interpersonal

more wrong on her assessment of things."

"The operations department is fully and appropriately staffed," he said. "Also, while Dan was a talented operations manager for the district, he was only a 'B' licensed operator."

According to Christian, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection requires the district to have a "C" license staff member at the plant six hours per day, five days per week, and to have a "C" licensee visit on the weekends. The licenses are issued by the FDEP after participants complete exams and prove their amount of hours worked. The district fills this requirement with "C" license staffers Danny Watson and Paul Hunter, Christian said.

Also, the plant has to

schedule, track emergency maintenance, etc."

Christian said Adams was hired specifically because he has experience with computerized asset management, and he is learning the new system.

"I would say the fact that Chris Wright was handling it isn't accurate. He participated in the conversion," Christian said.

Christian added that Adams is studying for his Florida "C" license, which requires the exams and documenting 2,000 hours of work experience. Adams already has such experience, so obtaining his license will be about a six-month process, he said.

Blank also wonders who is overseeing the district's \$14 million in planned construction projects, since the only construction project manager, Suzi Rubio, left

system," Blank wrote. "Right now, this is the only solution on the table. Tobin and [Robby] Majeska seem to be the only commissioners paying any attention to the problem. The other three need to stop getting distracted by interpersonal drama and really listen to what Tobin is saying."

Blank said in the past year the plant "lost two 'A' treatment plant operators," former operations manager Dan Saus and Chris Wright. During her tenure, she said she had three "A" license staffers, Saus, Wright and Jerred Primicerio, who is the current lead operator.

"At present," Blank wrote to the commissioners, "the district has one 'A' operator and two 'C' operators. One of those 'C' operators only obtained his license very recently. That means for a substantial amount of time the district was running the plant with only two licensed operators. You're cutting it very close in my opinion. You could wind up in compliance trouble. ... The district is a technical operation and it needs to be staffed by technically competent people. It's the GM's job to do that. And it is your job to make sure the GM is doing his job."

Majeska took Blank's comments seriously.

"Margaret's opinion means a lot to me," he told the Free Press. "As our past manager, she had a college degree in engineering and in accounting. So very little slips by her. As far as plant operations go, the fact that we only have one 'A' operator is one of the reasons that I wanted to look into outsourcing part of our plant operations."

Christian, who replaced Blank when she resigned in 2014, said she "could not be

after participants complete exams and prove their amount of hours worked. The district fills this requirement with "C" license staffers Danny Watson and Paul Hunter, Christian said.

Also, the plant has to have an "A" license operator, a position filled by Primicerio. If something were to happen to Primicerio, Christian said, the district could have Ed Castle, its consultant from Weiler Engineering, step in. And Christian pointed out that there will be two more employees obtaining a "C" license within 90 days, bringing the number of such staffers to four.

Commissioner Steve Gibbs agrees with Christian.

"Not only is our plant adequately staffed, we have a knowledgeable team that is led by skilled professionals," he said. "Margaret's constructive comments are most welcome, but she neglects to point out that we have backup with Weiler Engineering on board."

Blank is also concerned that Saus's replacement at operations manager, Charles Adams, does not have a Florida license, and that since Wright left, there is no one to take charge of asset management. Asset management is tracked by a computerized system that is new to the plant.

"The district has over \$150 million in assets to maintain," she told the Free Press. "You're not going to keep track of all that on a bunch of Post-it notes. ... As far as I know, Chris has never been replaced. ... The asset management system is used to keep track of all the components of the plant and collection system — make sure preventative maintenance is done on

license will be about a six-month process, he said.

Blank also wonders who is overseeing the district's \$14 million in planned construction projects, since the only construction project manager, Suzi Rubio, left.

"Weiler Engineering is driving the bus with construction management, and they always have been," Christian said.

Lauren Weinstock, the district's contract management specialist, is the liaison between the district and Weiler, Christian added.

As for why Blank is still vested in the day-to-day business of district — she left after nine years in August 2014 and now resides with her family in New Hampshire — she said she still owns property in Key Largo and is a taxpayer.

"It seems to me the board is allowing themselves to be sidetracked by interpersonal drama," she noted. "They need to turn their attention to the substantive issues being raised," making sure the plant is adequately staffed.

Majeska agrees. "The code enforcement and legal issues of late are a distraction from the real issues," he said.

As for the board spending too much time on code compliance and lawyer bills, Gibbs agrees.

"I am one of the commissioners who thinks it is well past time to focus on other aspects, but Mr. Tobin's needle seems stuck in a groove," he said.

The agenda for the next sewer district meeting on Nov. 3 includes taking action on a legal bill for work that Tobin requested and discussing Blank's letter.

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