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Subject: FYI: Water Dilemma in Flint

A Water Dilemma in Michigan: Cloudy or Costly?

By [MITCH SMITH](#) MARCH 24, 2015



Vernon White over the Flint River, which replaced Lake Huron as the water source in Flint, Mich. Mr. White says he buys soda to avoid the water.

FLINT, Mich. — Depending on the day, Melissa Mays says, the water flowing out of her home's faucets might have a blue tint. Or it might smell like mothballs. Or it might fill her home with the scent of an overchlorinated swimming pool.

Lately, Ms. Mays, who is 36 and works in marketing, has not been turning on her tap much at all. After Flint changed the source of its drinking water last spring, Ms. Mays said, she noticed a change in the water's color and odor. Then she started having [rashes](#), and clumps of her hair fell out. When the city issued a boil order, she stopped using the water for drinking and cooking. Now her family spends roughly \$400 a month on bottled water.

"My cat gets bottled water, our plants get bottled water, our fish gets bottled water," said Ms. Mays, who has helped organize marches to protest the water conditions and is on a city commission seeking input on how to move forward. "It takes four to five bottles of water to fill up a pot for spaghetti."

Flint officials insist that the city's water is safe. They say that the issues of odor and color are separate from the question of whether the water meets federal standards, and that no link to health problems has been proved.

Photo



Tony Palladeno Jr., escorted from a water advisory committee meeting for outbursts, says that the water in this bottle came out of his tap in January.

"We understand the concerns about discoloration and odors," said Gerald Ambrose, Flint's state-appointed emergency manager. "We tell everyone who complains that we would be more than happy to come out to their house and test their water."

Mr. Ambrose's position hints at deeper issues in Flint. Though the city has not declared bankruptcy, it has been in state receivership since 2011 and has deep-seated financial

problems, which Mr. Ambrose was appointed to help untangle. Add to that a plummeting population and violent crime rates that rank among the nation's worst, and the water question becomes one [headache](#) among many.

The problems, almost everyone agrees, started shortly after the city, in an effort to save money, switched from the supply of treated Lake Huron water it had long purchased from Detroit and started drawing water from the Flint River, treating it locally.

On Monday, Flint's City Council voted to "do all things necessary" to reconnect to the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department. Mr. Ambrose's response was swift. Flint water today is safe by all federal and state standards, he said in a statement Tuesday. "Water from Detroit is no safer than water from Flint," he said. "Users also pay some of the highest rates in the state because of the decreased numbers of users and the age of the system."

A sign downtown still refers to Flint as Vehicle City. Older residents recall growing up in a place that 200,000 people called home, where good-paying jobs in the General Motors factories were plentiful. Today, many of the auto plants are gone, the population is below 100,000, and once-prosperous neighborhoods are dotted with abandoned homes and vacant lots.

Photo



Tim Bednarski checking water at the treatment plant. Flint has increased chemical monitoring and hired a consulting firm to suggest improvements.

As Flint has shrunk, its network of water pipes built for a much larger metropolis has deteriorated. With fewer customers, water sometimes languishes in the system, becoming discolored. Moreover, water bills in Flint are far higher than those in neighboring communities. Officials say the switch away from Detroit water saves the city \$12 million a year.

"It's a very sore point, particularly when you have a population with a high degree of low-income folks," Mr. Ambrose said. "To me, the conversation we need to be having is, how do we lower those rates?"

Some residents say they would rather not debate the cost until they are confident that the water is safe. When fecal coliform bacteria showed up in parts of the city last summer, residents were told to boil their water before using it. Officials addressed the issue by pumping extra chlorine into the system, but in solving one problem, they created another.

The high chlorine levels led to elevated levels of total trihalomethanes or T.T.H.M., which required another public notice in January. Residents will again receive a notice of elevated T.T.H.M. levels in the mail later this month, Mayor Dayne Walling has said. Long-term consumption of water with high T.T.H.M. levels can lead to liver or kidney troubles and an increased risk of [cancer](#), according to the [Environmental Protection Agency](#).

Some here say Flint had been on the verge of a rebound when the water problems started. The walkable downtown area, just steps from the University of Michigan's campus here, is now home to the Flint Crepe Company and other new restaurants. And perhaps most significant, the emergency manager was expected to leave office in the coming weeks, handing power back to the elected mayor and City Council.



Melissa Mays said that after Flint changed its water source last spring, she developed rashes and clumps of her hair fell out.

"We continue to deal with a number of longstanding challenges with concentrated poverty and high crime and expensive, old infrastructure," said Mr. Walling, a Flint native who returned to his hometown after studying at Oxford as a Rhodes scholar. "But we're now 30 years past the major General Motors plant closings in the 1980s, and people are ready to move forward, so the new problems with water have been a huge setback." Mr. Walling said he and his family drank city water.

Mr. Walling and Mr. Ambrose conceded that communication should have been better when water problems emerged. But they say the city is reaching out to residents and answering questions. Officials installed a T.T.H.M. monitor at the treatment plant and hired a consulting firm to suggest improvements there, and they have asked state and federal officials for help. They also note that the switch to the Flint River is not permanent. A new pipeline connecting Flint to Lake Huron is expected to be completed next year.

Many in Flint, though, seem unconvinced. Saterra Hill, 17, a health sciences major at the University of Michigan-Flint, said she and her father purchased several gallon jugs of water each month instead of drinking tap water. Vernon White, 57, said he often bought soda to avoid the water.

For many, the water issue stirs emotions. On a recent weekday afternoon, dozens of people filled the basement of the city's transportation center for a meeting of a water advisory committee.

Tony Palladeno Jr., who arrived at the meeting in a red Flint baseball cap, was escorted out by a police officer for repeated outbursts. Mr. Palladeno, 53, keeps a bottle of yellowish water with a layer of sediment that he said came out of his tap in January. He said local officials had not acted quickly enough to fix the problems.

"I don't feel hopeful," Mr. Palladeno said. "At one time, I loved this town. I still love it. There's good people here. But the governing is killing us. I think we need a federal intervention."