

NOW

BGR's Spotlight on Local Government Issues

The S&WB: Looking for a Few Good Members

January 2, 2014

Last October, voters approved a charter amendment that enabled reforms to the composition of the Sewerage & Water Board of New Orleans (S&WB). The reforms, set forth primarily in state legislation, eliminated the City Council members from the board and created a smaller board consisting of the mayor, two members of the Board of Liquidation, City Debt, and eight citizens selected through a nominating process.

That nominating process is now underway. Its outcome could have a significant influence on the future of the S&WB – and by extension the future of infrastructure in New Orleans. To reinvigorate the agency, some of the city's sharpest minds and most effective leaders must offer to serve. And they need to do so soon, because the application deadline is Jan. 31.

In February, the Sewerage & Water Board Selection Committee is expected to begin its work. Ultimately, it will submit three names for each vacancy to the mayor, who will make the selections with the consent of the City Council. The selection committee is comprised of representatives from: Dillard University, Delgado Community College, Loyola University, Southern University at New Orleans, Tulane University, the University of New Orleans, Xavier University, the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce, New Orleans Regional Black Chamber of Commerce and the Urban League of Greater New Orleans.

The S&WB faces monumental challenges. The condition of the agency's sewer, water and

drainage infrastructure is in many areas abysmal. Few would argue that the agency is a model of operational effectiveness or efficiency. With hundreds of millions of new funding coming from ratepayers in the coming years to finance sewer and water improvements and bolster operations, strong management and stewardship will be crucial. Meanwhile, the agency must find additional funding for looming drainage-related obligations and plan for long-term capital needs. And the low level of public confidence in the S&WB demands a new era of probity in contracting and transparency in governance.

To assemble a board equipped for these challenges, the committee will have to find citizens who are:

- Honest.
- Independent-minded and ready to push for answers to tough questions.
- Committed to transparency.
- Able to make a significant time commitment.
- Willing and able to analyze a variety of complex data.
- Focused on improving service to the public at large.

In addition, citizens with a diversity of expertise will be necessary. Given the agency's challenges, financial and management expertise would be particularly beneficial. Citizens who have experience with either the operation of large enterprises or the technical aspects of operating a utility could play a valuable role.

The Selection Committee and the Mayor are responsible for determining the makeup of the S&WB's citizen membership. But they can make strong choices only if strong candidates present themselves. For those who are fed up with the S&WB's past performance and have the skills and fortitude to help turn the agency around, now is the time to step forward.

BGR strongly encourages qualified citizens to apply. For more information, go to: <http://www.swbno.org/documents/NoticeOfVacancy.pdf>.

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