

# NOW

BGR's Spotlight on Local Government Issues

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## **S&WB Should Delay Search for a New Leader**

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Last spring the Louisiana Legislature passed a bill to revamp the composition of the Sewerage & Water Board's governing body. The changes are contingent on the passage of a corresponding charter amendment, which goes before voters on October 19. If the amendment passes, a new board – consisting of the mayor, two members of the Board of Liquidation, City Debt, and eight citizens selected through a nominating process – could be in place as early as January 1, 2014.

At its next meeting, the current board is expected to initiate the search for a successor for the S&WB's executive director, who is retiring at year end, by choosing an executive search firm. The board's goal, as discussed at its most recent executive committee and board meetings, is to select a new executive director in December. In other words, it is planning to make this important decision just weeks before a new board might take office.

Hiring an executive director and holding that person accountable are two of the most important functions of any governing board. They are even more important in the case of the S&WB, given the tremendous challenges that the entity faces.

It makes no sense for a board that might be replaced in the next few months to select a new executive director. Its action could saddle a new board with a leader that it would not have chosen and deprive that board of a key opportunity to shape the S&WB's future. In addition, since

the executive director serves at the pleasure of the board, premature action could also discourage qualified individuals from coming forward.

Initiating the search process at this time is also problematic. The process proposed by the executive committee's recommended consultant, Colin Baenziger & Associates, involves board input throughout. It begins with a needs assessment, in which board members are interviewed about their vision for the board, the challenges it faces and their expectations for the future executive director. Based on those interviews and other sources, the consultant develops recruitment materials and submits them to the board for approval. The consultant then recruits and screens candidates, and presents five to eight semi-finalists to the board. The board then meets with the consultant to choose five finalists, who undergo further interviews and assessments with the board. The board makes its selection shortly after completing this final step in the evaluation. The process is expected to take 60 to 90 days.

If the governance reforms take effect, all the board input will have been provided by the current board, rather than the board to which the new executive director would report. One might argue that the current board should not delay because it has the most experience with the agency and its challenges, but the new board members may have a different vision and ideas. And ultimately they would be responsible for the new executive's performance.

In addition, beginning the search now would be unfair to the candidates. They would undergo extensive vetting by board members who could be gone after January 1. They would be responding to the expectations of the current board, yet coming to work in 2014 for a mostly new set of bosses and expectations. Candidates should have the opportunity to understand the expectations of the board that will hold them accountable.

Finally, given the 60 to 90 days anticipated for the search process, delaying its start is not likely to significantly disrupt S&WB operations.

The S&WB board of directors should delay any decision to initiate the executive search process until after the October 19 election. If voters reject the ballot proposition and the governance reforms fail, then the current board would remain in place and proceed with the search. However, if voters adopt the reforms, the board should postpone the entire search process until early 2014 after the new board members are seated. The board should appoint an interim executive director to fill any gap between the retirement of the current executive director and the decision on her successor.

With governance reforms on the horizon, delaying the search process would give the new board the opportunity to consider and select a leader it feels will best strengthen the agency's performance. It's a decision worth waiting on.

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