

A vibrant, high-angle photograph of the Chicago skyline and the Chicago River. The river flows through the center, with several boats visible. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds. The buildings are a mix of classic stone structures and modern glass skyscrapers. The foreground shows a concrete walkway and lush green trees.

# State of Our Sewage

Progress Report 2018-2022

**CAMERON  
DAVIS**

COMMISSIONER

Metropolitan Water Reclamation District

[CAMDAVIS.ORG](http://CAMDAVIS.ORG)

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# **The Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago is often considered to be a mysterious agency, even if some Cook County residents are interested in what it does: treat our wastewater and reduce flooding.**

But the agency does and can do much more than that with the right vision. And every two years, we elect three of nine commissioners. But what do they do? How does the agency work? Sure, by using plants, pumps, and pipes. But most importantly, it works because of its people. That means its workers. It also means you.

This is my first progress report since you elected me in 2018. In it, I'll tell you a few stories. Along the way, I'll give you an update on what I've accomplished on your behalf and telegraph where the agency should be headed to make our metro area the most resilient in the country.

Let's dive in.

Cam



# From Sewage to Sustainability: Our Region Takes the Lead

The agency protects the Chicago metro area's public health and safety through reduced flooding and improved water quality in Lake Michigan and the Chicago River System.

The District's service area is in Cook County, the second largest county in the U.S. by land area. In fact, the MWRD's service area alone is big enough to be represented by nine Congressional districts. The service area is 882 square miles, roughly half of Cook County's 1,635 acres.

Our metro area was settled on flat, mostly marshy land that required drainage. Later, industrial development and poor sewage treatment threatened Chicago's drinking water supply, Lake Michigan, which in turn threatened public health. And the same industrial development degraded waterways that had teemed with wild rice, fish, wildlife, and other indicators of environmental health.

By the late 1800s, it was clear that the region's survival depended in large part on understanding the big picture: the imperatives of public health, public safety, and environmental protection needs must be integrated and achieved together. It was an example of the region building on its existing leadership in environmental systems. Or as the science would come to be known: "ecology."

We're continuing the tradition of leaders like Stephen Forbes to do more and do better.

Today my work is guided by the "four Es."

**Education**      **Equity**  
**Environment**    **Economy**

If our work accomplishes one or more of these, we'll push for it. If it doesn't accomplish one of them, we won't.

## Historical Headlines

### Stephen Forbes and the Birth of North American Ecology



Lake Michigan was starting to show signs of disturbance after the sun had set one night in September 1881. The lake's choppy surface seemed to unsettle Stephen Forbes, who was trawling with his crew off the coast of Chicago, so they headed to shore. Forbes landed his boat in the infamous Streeterville community, known for its drinking, gambling, and other sordid activities. Armed with only a pocketknife, he unfolded it and kept it in open position to be ready for anything.

A former cavalryman for an Illinois regiment in the Civil War, Forbes was tough. But he wasn't ready for a street fight in Streeterville because he wasn't a longshoreman. He was an "economic biologist," studying the predator-prey relationships of fish. At a time when biologists were obsessed with capturing, identifying, and cataloging individual species, Forbes was interested in something deeper: the relationships between organisms. He later studied fisheries in the Illinois River to discern whether Chicago's "offal"

impacted downstream towns. He looked to the bellies of the fish he caught in Lake Michigan and other Midwestern waters to give him clues about those predator-prey relationships and environmental health.

Today, an economic biologist would be called an "ecologist." But in 1881, that profession didn't exist. That is, until Forbes and other pioneering thinkers came along. The National Academy of Sciences now acknowledges Forbes as "the founder of the science of ecology in the United States" and it started right here at home. Systems thinking is something that our region can excel at. And it would get a boost in that direction eight years later, with the establishment of the agency that is today's Metropolitan Water Reclamation District. ■

# Leading: Ideas into Action

We elect people to do what's best for the future and get things done. Since being elected, I'm proud to have led and advocated for policies, resolutions, and programs that promote environmental and economic health, advance equity, and educate the next generation.

## Advancing Environmental Justice

I pushed, in the 2022 budget, to have environmental justice elevated within the agency. Now MWRD will have a dedicated environmental justice advocate reporting to the executive director, charged with coordinating outreach, programs, and grants to help the communities that need it most. And, MWRD will have a dedicated engineer, focusing on work in communities of potential environmental justice concern.

## Water Equity Resolution

After seeing efforts to profit from water in California, and fielding more questions at speeches about whether Lake Michigan water should be sold; I introduced a resolution in June 2021 to declare access to water and sanitation a fundamental human right, opposing the commodification of water, and reaffirming that Great Lakes water can't be sold for private purposes. The Chicago Sun-Times also published [my opinion piece](#) on the matter. I also called to update the Great Lakes Water Resources Compact to get in front of future threats.

The city council of Traverse City adopted the resolution on December 6, 2021 and other municipalities around the region, like Detroit, are beginning to take notice.



# Leading: Ideas into Action

## Greening Suburban Schoolyards

For years, MWRD has partnered with the [City of Chicago](#), [Openlands](#), [Healthy Schools Campaign](#), and others to bring green infrastructure – using nature to filter and cycle stormwater back into the landscape – to schoolyards. But the program is limited to schools within the City. After passing a measure with unanimous support, the agency allocated \$1 million for suburban schoolyard green infrastructure projects. The measure will allow MWRD to design green infrastructure projects in suburban school lands to reduce stormwater and educate students. This is in addition to \$5.5 million appropriated under the existing Chicago program. Now we're looking for matching sources of funds by the State and County.

## Fiscal Responsibility

At a time when many Illinois units of government struggle to keep up with pension payments, My colleagues and I have advocated for using one-time funds to pay down MWRD's pension liability. At the request of the MWRD's Board, the Illinois House and General Assembly passed a law authorizing the agency to use one-time funding to pay down \$30 million in MWRD pension obligations this year. This will provide fiscal stability and help us further reduce taxpayer burdens in the long run.

## Identifying Disproportionately Impacted Areas

I inserted language into MWRD's Watershed Management Ordinance that recognizes "Disproportionately Impacted Areas" (DIAs), communities—typically minority

neighborhoods—that shoulder more than their fair share of flooding. The agency now explicitly recognizes the need to identify and address communities overburdened with stormwater.

## Helping Our Workers

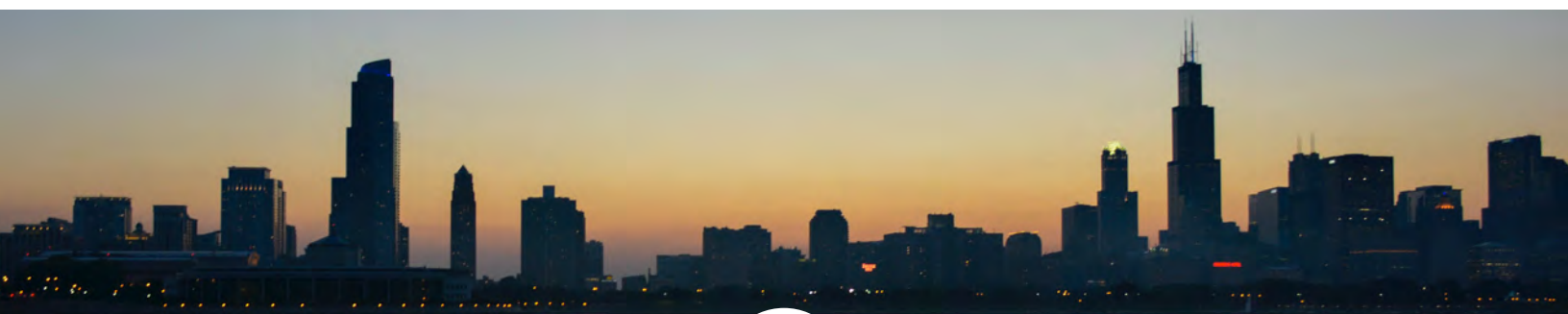
I've supported giving our workers more access to Health Savings Accounts (HSA). With rising inflation and healthcare costs affecting our budgets, having access to an HSA, especially after retirement, can make a huge difference to someone who has dedicated their career to the agency's mission. I've been proud to support making HSAs accessible to those who need it most. This benefit also makes attracting and retaining workers easier during "The Great Resignation" from jobs nationwide.

## City of Chicago and MWRD Collaboration

A big part of what we can do to drive more efficient government for taxpayer savings is to break down siloes. I continue to forge strategic partnerships between MWRD and Chicago, among others, to encourage data sharing, joint purchasing, stormwater management, and procurement efforts.

## International Women's Day

The Board unanimously approved two resolutions I sponsored honoring two women-led organizations, Blacks in Green, and YWCA Metropolitan Chicago, aimed at empowering women, especially women of color, through workforce development training, improving safety and wellness, and promoting equity and inclusion in the workforce.



# Leading: Ideas into Action

## Strategic Plan Performance

The MWRD Board of Commissioners adopted a [five-year strategic plan](#) in 2021, with strategies and initiatives that identify and support environmental justice, climate resilience, and workforce excellence goals. The staff has also developed an internal project selection process to identify disproportionately impacted communities to guide funding decisions. I've pushed for a dashboard so that we, as taxpayers, can track progress in implementing the strategic plan, including greenhouse gas reductions, to do our part to fight climate change.

## Strengthening Water Quality

When established in 2014, MWRD's Watershed Management Ordinance (WMO) did not recognize the linkage between flooding and water quality. Yet, when stormwater rushes off the land, it doesn't just cause flooding. Stormwater can carry sediment, nutrients, metals, and pesticides into our waterways. Working with civic organizations like [Friends of the Chicago River](#), [The Nature Conservancy](#), and [Metropolitan Planning Council](#), we took the lead in pushing the WMO to include water quality impacts from stormwater, not just water quantity impacts, again for the first time in the agency's history.



## Thank You to a Leader!

In October 2021, President Biden appointed Debra Shore to head the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Region 5 office, overseeing six Great Lakes states. Before joining EPA, Debra was a fellow commissioner and joined the MWRD's Board in 2006.

For Debra's last MWRD Board meeting, I drafted a resolution honoring her, citing her work to establish the Cook County drug take-back program, the first-ever Office of the Independent Inspector General, and a precedent-setting Board-driven strategic plan, among so many other achievements. Debra was and continues to be an advocate for LGBTQ leadership in government.

Debra is known as an expert communicator, a proactive and responsive public servant, and a stalwart conservationist. I'm proud to be her friend and to continue like-minded work on the MWRD Board.

*Above: Commissioner Davis shown with Commissioner Debra Shore and Gina McCarthy, Cam's former U.S. EPA colleague, who went on to be appointed by President Biden as his domestic climate change advisor.*

# The Four Es

Often, people think of things in binary ways. Yes or no. Black or white. Up or down. And, even the environment or the economy, as if it's one of those things versus the other. Every day, these false choices limit our progress. One way I keep from being deceived by false choices is to be guided by the Four Es.

## Education & Outreach

Are we positioning the next generation to make better decisions when they take the helm?

## Equity

Are our decisions favoring some communities over others on the basis of race, ethnicity, or other factors? If so, they're bad decisions. We are leading the effort to recognize that flooding hurts some of our communities disproportionately.

Check out more about this subject in this report to see how we're advancing equity.

## Environment

Our job is to protect water (land, and air) because life depends on it.

## Economy

The environment is the world's oldest economy, where raw materials—water, soil, air, or sunlight—provide energy for life. The “economy,” as we traditionally think of it, is no different. Water provides jobs. We're at the point where water doesn't protect itself. It depends on trained professionals.





## Education & Outreach

COVID-19 didn't slow us down. Here's an abbreviated list of the recent outreach to help do our part to educate Cook County about water, MWRD, and some of the opportunities that lie ahead.

- Southland Community Meeting
- Lincoln Drainage District Meeting
- Canal Shores Earth Day
- Village of Matteson Recycling
- AEG Stakeholders Conference
- NAACP
- Northwest Suburbs Organizing for Action
- University Club
- Benny Starr, Artist -In-Residence for US Water Alliance
- UIC Fresh Water Lab

*Photos from top to bottom:  
Canal Shores Earth Day cleanup  
event; Participating in outreach  
event in Des Plaines; Chicago 3<sup>rd</sup>  
Ward back-to-school benefit;  
Volunteering at the Village of  
Matteson recycling event.*



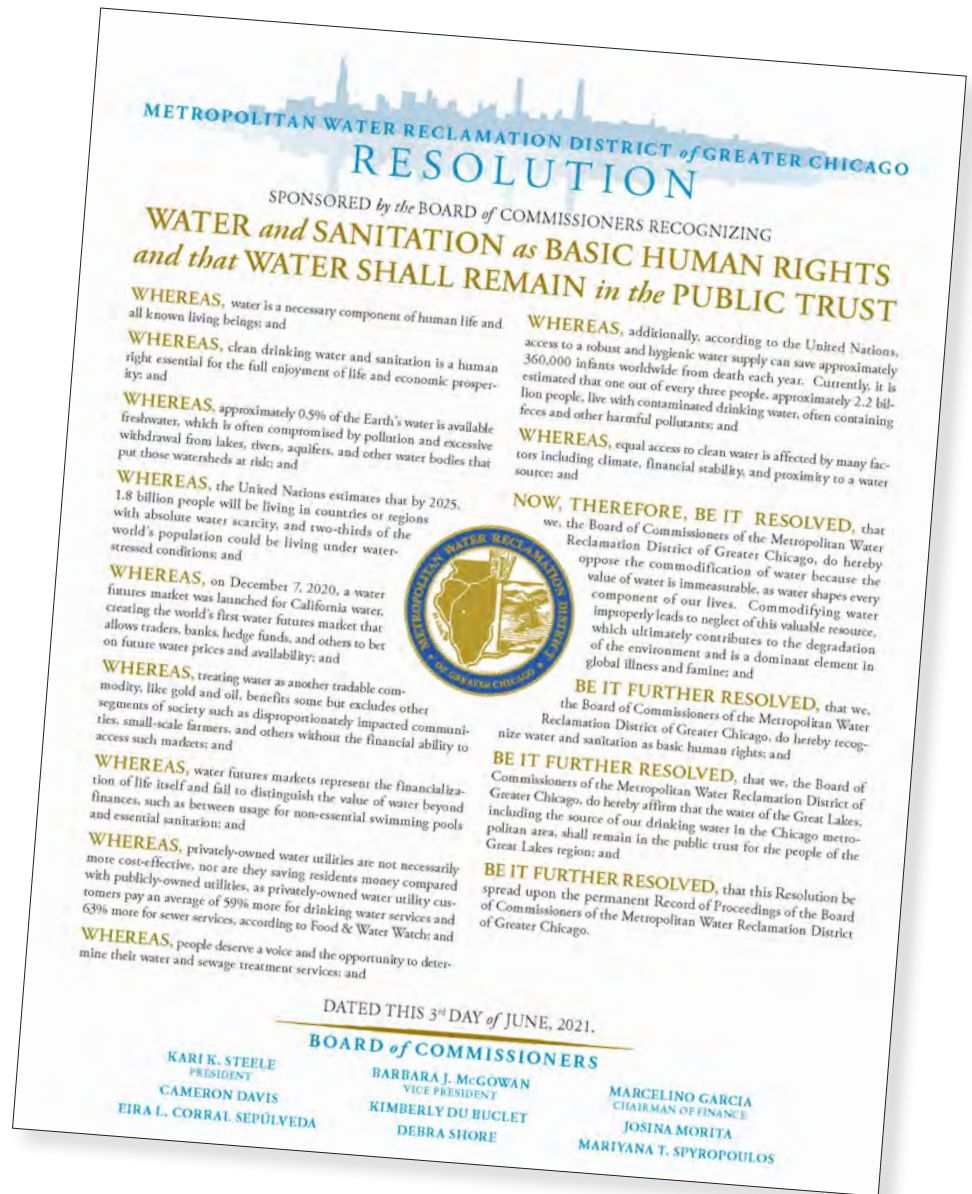
## Equity

### Environmental Justice

MWRD's Board unanimously approved the formation of two of the Environmental Justice positions to ensure MWRD has personnel dedicated to promoting environmental justice. Goals include coordinating environmental justice efforts on the part of MWRD and identifying opportunities for MWRD to promote environmental justice. Further district efforts in recruiting and hiring a diverse workforce, identifying funding opportunities around environmental justice, building partnerships in disproportionately impacted communities and reviewing stormwater projects with an environmental justice lens. The MWRD is committed to promoting environmental justice to fulfill its mission to protect the health and safety of the public equitably.

### Water Equity Resolution

As a world-class environmental leader, the MWRD must be at the forefront of protecting water rights for all. New pressures from climate change, water waste, and the commodification of water threaten access to drinking water and sanitation in unprecedented ways. That is why I sponsored a critical resolution to declare access to water and sanitation as a basic human right, oppose the commodification of water, and declare that the water of the Great Lakes shall remain in the public trust. The resolution was drafted after consulting environmental advocates on the frontlines of equitable water access and represents a strong commitment from the MWRD Board to protect water rights for all. And while I am thrilled that the resolution passed unanimously, I will continue to champion water accessibility for all. To learn more about the resolution, please read the related piece by Gary Wilson, [Question of Diversion: Great Lakes Governors Group Silent on Future Water Threats – Great Lakes Now](#).





**BEFORE**



**AFTER**

## Environment

### Green Infrastructure

Schools play a significant role in our lives well beyond being places for learning. In 2021, I introduced a measure to bring green infrastructure to our suburban schoolyards, and the Board allocated \$1 million for producing designs.

The MWRD has already successfully implemented green infrastructure—using nature to let stormwater soak back into the world rather than sending it through expensive pipes, plants, and pumps for treatment—in Chicago Public Schools' campuses by partnering with the [Healthy Schools Campaign](#), [Openlands](#), [Chicago Public Schools](#), and the [Chicago Department of Water Management](#). The MWRD funds for these green schoolyards have not only provided flood mitigation, but also provided children with critical areas to play, learn, and thrive.

Here are some factoids on the Space to Grow program in Chicago Public Schools:

- Since 2014, the Space to Grow partnership has converted 30 schoolyards, providing an engaging place to learn and grow but also significant stormwater capacity.
- These schoolyards combine for a total storage volume of 5.6 million gallons per rain event.
- This design retention capacity is equivalent to 8.4 Olympic-size pools or 111,108 bathtubs per rain event.

After seeing the success of the program, the MWRD reviewed sites and prepared to replicate the same success throughout Cook County. MWRD conducted a survey to anticipate interest from suburban schools in installing green infrastructure on their site. Twenty-nine suburban schools responded to MWRD's request for signs of interest; 84% of respondents said work is needed on their existing school parking lots or other hard surfaces. We're now seeking State and County funds as a match to get projects off the ground.



## Environment

### Water Quality

The Chicago River still suffers from decades of past pollution called “legacy” contaminants. The most infamous is Bubbly Creek, which Upton Sinclair immortalized in his book *The Jungle*.

Not far away is another small segment of the Chicago River, the Collateral Channel. Surrounded by Little Village and near Pilsen, two predominantly Latinx communities, the Collateral Channel is home to contaminated sediments. Unfortunately, government agencies have been passing the buck on cleaning up these waterways for decades. I helped draft and promote language with the offices of U.S. Senators Dick Durbin and Tammy Duckworth that would expand authority for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to take a more prominent role in Chicago River cleanup that affects these disproportionately impacted communities. As of now, the Senate still needs to act on the proposed expanded authority.



**Bubbly Creek in the early 1900s**



**Bubbly Creek today**



## Economics

### Pension Debt

MWRD should be a place where hard work is rewarded with fair wages. As municipal agencies like MWRD struggled to balance their finances in the face of the pandemic, I have relayed union concerns to agency management and voted along with all of my fellow commissioners to extend the time for collective bargaining agreements to be negotiated. We have now come to agreements with many of our unions to ensure the MWRD remains an employer with world class staff to serve the people of Cook County.

### Inspector General

One of my earliest votes was to approve the establishment of an Inspector General at the MWRD. Since 2019, for the first time in the agency's history, MWRD now has a team of lawyers and forensic accountants that can

help identify and correct waste, fraud, and abuse. Thanks to the leadership of colleagues like Commissioner Mariyana Spyropoulos and former Commissioner Debra Shore, MWRD has had an Office of the Independent Inspector General since 2019. I was pleased to be one vote of many in favor of this good government measure.

### Budget

Most recently, for 2023, our Board approved a fiscally responsible FY22 budget to help meet our mission of treating wastewater, increasing flood control, and protecting public health. The MWRD budget makes sound investments in our communities while helping the MWRD maintain its high bond ratings, AAA bond rating from Fitch Ratings and AA+ bond rating from Standards & Poor's, a welcome outlier among many Illinois units of government.



## Leading: Ideas for Future Action

I'm always looking for new ideas to do more and better. Here's a peek into my thoughts about future pursuits.

### Urban Farming

MWRD is the second largest public landowner in Cook County, second only to the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. We should get as much benefit out of our land as we can for absorbing stormwater, enhancing recreation, carbon capture, habitat, and other "co-benefits." I'm working on an initiative that would allow food to be grown while reducing stormwater. According to the Greater Chicago Food Depository, an estimated one in seven Cook County residents experiences food insecurity, with up to 50% of some communities' residents experiencing chronic shortages (as opposed to just being occasionally hungry). Why not facilitate the elimination of food deserts by optimizing the use of MWRD property as long as these uses also achieve MWRD's core missions of water quality and flood reduction?



### Bringing Back the Green to Our Shorelines

What if instead of generating revenue from land uses that require paved property, MWRD could generate revenue by absorbing stormwater? And what if, in the process, MWRD could support Disproportionately Impacted Areas? What if this approach could benefit public health, ecological health, and habitat? In other words, what if "blue" (stormwater) could be turned into "green" (space and revenue) to benefit Black and Brown communities? We are exploring this idea.

# Emerging Leaders

Elected officials simply can't do their job without great staff. My team is dedicated to the public interest, works hard, and, maybe best of all, are wonderful people.



**Dawn Walker**  
*Chief of Staff*

Dawn joined my team in January 2020 as Director of Outreach and Constituency Services and was promoted to Chief of Staff when Christian Sorensen left to become Chief of Staff to Rep. Robyn Gabel. Before joining my team, Dawn was Director of the Rain-Ready program at the Center for Neighborhood Technology, one of Chicago's leading non-profit organizations. While there, she became – and still is – one of the region's top experts on flooding and its disproportionate impacts on society. Dawn received her bachelor's from Dominican University and is a Board member of International Her<sub>2</sub>O.



**Carl Camacho**  
*Director of Budget & Policy*

Carl Camacho, MPA, is an experienced public administrator, union organizer, and policy strategist. Driven by his values of education and community, Carl has managed and led programs that have directly improved environmental, financial, and health outcomes. Carl joined my team in October 2022 after serving with former Commissioner Josina Morita, and currently serves as the Director of Policy & Budget. Carl is a native of South Chicago and enjoys baseball, outdoor activities, and his family.



**Brenden Rauch**  
*Manager of Communications & Outreach*

Brenden joined the team in the fall of 2022. Before joining the team, Brenden received a bachelor's degree from DePaul University in Communications and Media, focusing on environmental communication. Finding passion in gardening, Brenden is a member of a local community garden and has been a lifelong baker. Brenden loves to explore new ingredients, foraged and store-bought. Brenden is a co-chair of the Edgewater Environmental Coalition.

# Former Staff Members



**Lauren Banks**  
*Special Projects Manager*



**Imani Clayton**  
*Director Community Outreach & Engagement*



**Marshall Gibson**  
*Manager of Communications*



**James O'Brien**  
*Director of Budget & Policy*



**Christian Sorenson**  
*Chief of Staff*



**Sydney Weiss**  
*Special Projects Manager*





## **In Memoriam** **John Fox**

John had been with my office since the get-go. Bumping up from part-time to full-time in July 2020, John was the director of programs and budget. John passed away unexpectedly on November 10, 2020. He was just getting started in doing his part to help save our part of the world. He was collegial, hardworking, and dedicated. He was an avid runner with a keen mind and easy smile, always willing to find humor yet never willing to laugh at someone else's expense. On November 19th, 2020, the Board unanimously passed a resolution in his honor. Today, he's survived by his parents, Ramon and Patricia Fox, fiancée Alexandria Seydel, and their golden retriever Thumper. What John stood for continues to fuel my work today.