

Rowland grilled at public meeting

by Jennifer Krahe

DESERT HILLS – Mary Beth Rowland, vice president of the troubled Desert Hills Water Company, quietly sobbed during an unexpected confrontation on Saturday with angry customers.

"I'm just here to listen," Rowland said when she arrived unannounced at the meeting organized by Desert Hills residents.

More than 30 DHW customers gathered at Desert View Bible Church to discuss their plans to stage a public protest of the water company and to present a show of force before state utility regulators at a hearing later this month.

The Arizona Corporation Commission on Aug. 21 is slated to hold an evidentiary hearing to determine whether DHW is in violation of water service regulations.

Residents are staging a protest against DHW at 5 p.m. on Aug. 11 at the corner of 24th Street and Carefree Highway.

At the Saturday meeting, attendees insisted Rowland answer their questions about extremely low water pressure and oftentimes nonexistent water service.

"I'm not here to be abused," Rowland said. "I'm here to find out how we can help you."

Rowland was promptly asked when her company will take the necessary corrective measures to improve water service.

Among the directives stemming from a June 16 commission hearing was that a pumping station be completed by DHW within 60 days—Aug. 16.

Some in the audience peppered Rowland with questions as to when that pumping station—on the south side of Cloud Road between 12th and 14th streets—will be built, and asked why they are being charged for bad service. Rowland responded that the station would be complete in three weeks—Aug. 26—but that she was, again, at the mercy of contractors.

In addition, many wanted to know why DHW must rely upon Cave Creek Water Company, owned by Global Water Resources, and Anthem provider Arizona American Water.

"What happens if Arizona American or Global cuts off your water?" came the question from the back of the room. "She doesn't even have a water company without the other two companies," said Doreen Stegman. Rowland reported she is working with Arizona American Water on a permanent agreement.

Rowland blamed press coverage, an under-producing well, the size of her staff, Global/Cave Creek Water Co. and "bad luck" for her company's woes—answers which many attendees did not want to hear.

"We're not here to listen to your excuses," some shouted. Others stormed out of the meeting.

Rowland told the angry residents she is in the process of establishing a Web site to better communicate with customers.

"A Web site is not going to flush toilets," someone yelled back.

At one particularly heated moment, Rowland stepped away and began to cry.

Before walking out of the meeting in frustration, resident Sam Perone asked Rowland:

"Do you want to keep it (DHW) or sell it?"

Rowland said in response, "If I could today, I'd get out of the business."

Despite the angry tone of the meeting, several people thanked Rowland for attending.

At the conclusion of the meeting, Cave Creek Councilman Thomas McGuire stood up and told the audience: "If Global wanted to help out—they would. We have not found Global to be forthcoming with correct information." He added, "If we (Cave Creek) were in a position to help, we would."

McGuire's comments prompted some in the audience to question why he was at the meeting and if his statements were politically motivated.

Following unsuccessful attempts by the Town of Cave Creek to purchase Cave Creek Water Co., the town filed a condemnation suit to acquire the company by right of eminent domain. That suit is pending.

Late Tuesday, Global Water Resources spokesman Paul Walker said the company's planned booster pumping station to aid Desert Hills is on hold, due to being "in the middle of a bureaucratic situation." He explained that the planned site is on state trust land, "with a very high level of conservation status that won't allow utility easements through it," and added, "We're back at the map again."

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