

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin

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For Hill, there's always more to be done with water

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IN-HOUSE COUNSEL

Water, water everywhere

Hill leads legal team at agency that controls rainfall, treats sewage, reversed river's flow

BY ROY STROM
Law Bulletin staff writer

Tucked away on Erie Street, just west of bustling Michigan Avenue, sits a squat, concrete-and-glass building that since 1955 has housed the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago's headquarters.

For close to 25 years, Ronald M. Hill has called the third-floor law department his professional home. And since 2011, the door to the department has listed his name and title: general counsel.

The MWRD, a government agency with a \$1.2 billion budget this year, is perhaps best-known for reversing the flow of the Chicago River in 1900. It has treated sewage since it was founded 125 years ago as the Sanitary District of Chicago.

For all the MWRD's history, a slew of new responsibilities have drastically expanded its operations over the past decade.

In 2004, it was first tasked with controlling Chicago's stormwater. In June, it was given authority to acquire flood-prone properties. And legislation that will allow it to sell its byproducts from wastewater treatment as renewable energy resources is awaiting Gov. Patrick J. Quinn's signature.

To Hill, the place is changing faster than ever — and not just because heavy rains have become more common.

"Since I've taken over this job, there has been significant change just in the scope of the work we're doing, and the pace of the work has accelerated dramatically," said Hill, who grew up in Bridgeport and graduated from Loyola University Chicago with a criminal justice degree before earning his law degree

there in 1982.

"It's always been busy. But I think it's become more intense, definitely, over the last few years."

Hill was named acting general counsel on Jan. 1, 2011, shortly after both the then-general counsel and then-deputy general counsel retired.

The bulk of the MWRD's expansion has come from the state legislature since the 2011 appointment of Executive Director David St. Pierre by the MWRD's nine-member, elected board of commissioners.

St. Pierre called Hill a "perfect match" for his leadership style.

"I'm looking at possibilities," St. Pierre said. "And Ron is an excellent counselor to me, in terms of making sure that (for all of) the things we're doing, we're checking off the legal boxes (and) we're working within the parameters of our authority from a state level."

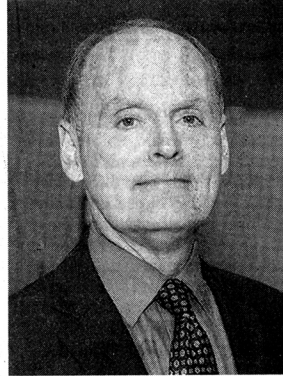
Tom H. Luetkemeyer, a Hinshaw & Culbertson LLP partner who has handled labor and employment matters for the MWRD since the 1990s and attended law school with Hill, said the general counsel has the right disposition to manage a complex, changing legal department.

"He's a very calm and measured individual," Luetkemeyer said. "I don't think I've ever seen him get angry. At the same time, I don't think I've ever seen him overly passive. ... And if there's one thing that's good to have in a manager, it's a consistent and calm style."

Hill refers to the 18-lawyer department as "a small law firm that has a very diverse practice."

"I would stack them up against any private firm of the same size, he said.

The department currently divides into four groups — envi-



Ronald M. Hill

General Counsel, Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago

- **Location:** Chicago
- **Size:** \$1.2 billion budget; about 2,000 employees
- **Law department:** 18 lawyers, six paralegals
- **Age:** 57
- **Law school:** Loyola University Chicago School of Law, 1982
- **Organizations:** Member, Illinois State Bar Association
- **Interests:** Reading early American history, spending time with his wife and three daughters, playing tennis and being a lifelong Cubs fan

ronmental, real estate, employment (the MWRD has nearly 2,000 employees) and a contract and finance group.

With 9,500 acres of land in Cook County and another 14,000 acres in downstate Fulton County where they once shipped biosolids, the MWRD has long been among the largest local landowners. Among other things, MWRD real estate attorneys deal with the leasing of parcels of land, which is expected to generate about \$15 million this year. The agency's tax levy this year is \$540.3 million.

While the number of employees and real estate are nothing new, Hill said the focus of the department has shifted as the scope of the MWRD's authority has grown.

For instance, the environmental section — which is where Hill predominately practiced before becoming general counsel — is now one of the largest areas of focus.

Since it was granted regional

authority for stormwater management in 2004, the MWRD has entered into many agreements with other government bodies to help relieve flooding, Hill said. That number will increase after the agency in June was granted authority to commence smaller-scale, local stormwater relief projects.

In addition, the MWRD is poised to sell some of the byproducts from its seven wastewater treatment plants. While some of that is still in the planning process, the byproducts could include natural gas, phosphorous and "biosolids" — the organic matter left over from treating sewage that is used as fertilizer.

"We're turning into a publicly owned treatment works of the present and the future, in terms of getting into a lot of resource recovery of what we generate at the plants," Hill said. "So what our lawyers are doing now compared to what they were doing a few years ago is a lot different."

The MWRD is also involved in a lawsuit filed in 2009 by Michigan and four other states that are attempting to compel the MWRD and Army Corps of Engineers to do more to prevent Asian carp, an invasive species, from reaching Lake Michigan. The lawsuit is currently in the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

Some have advocated for reversing the flow of the Chicago River to sever the carp's path to the lake, which Hill said would have "all kinds of ramifications."

"The main goal, which is everybody's main goal, is to stop the carp from getting into the lake," said Hill, who argued a preliminary injunction hearing in the case in Chicago's federal court.

Despite all the changes at the agency, the largest project facing the MWRD is also its longest-running — the Tunnel and Reservoir Plan, which broke ground in 1975.

Also known as Chicago's Deep Tunnel, it is a plan designed to prevent sewage backups in basements by routing stormwater away from sewers and into underground pipes — some as wide as 33 feet in diameter — that will drain into three massive reservoirs.

The Deep Tunnel system has 109 miles of piping, completed in 2006. One of the reservoirs is scheduled to open at the quarry bordering Interstate 80 in Thornton in 2015.

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providing 7.9 billion gallons of storage. The final reservoir is scheduled to come online in 2029, bringing the system's holding capacity to 17.5 billion gallons.

A timely Deep Tunnel completion has become more important as heavy rains have increased in recent years.

But St. Pierre said more needs to be done — he suggested a

stormwater plan with Cook County — to prevent the damage that accompanies floods like the one in April 2013 that prompted the Federal Emergency Management Agency to approve more than \$163 million in individual assistance and close to \$19 million in public assistance to affected communities.

"Deep Tunnel certainly is a cor-

nerstone to flood protection, and the benefits that the community receives even from what's in the ground already is fairly tremendous," St. Pierre said.

"But it's not the do-all, end-all in these events. We've got to keep water out of the system in these events."

Hill credited St. Pierre and MWRD's board for driving much of

the change at the agency, such as the renewable energy projects, by "looking beyond the traditional things the district has done."

"It's beneficial. It's good for the environment. It's good for taxpayers," Hill said. "And the executive director along with the board have driven the process. It's very exciting but very challenging."

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