

Testimony by Dennis Biondich, Owner of American Sewer Services
before the Milwaukee Common Council Steering and Rules Committee

December 18, 2017- 10:00 AM

President Hamilton and members of the Steering and Rules Committee
I appreciate this opportunity to appear before you to discuss the recent incidents involving employees of American Sewer Services.

First and foremost, I want you to know that I share your outrage over the disturbing display of hate speech that was exhibited by one of my employees. His actions and beliefs in no way represent the feelings of American Sewer Services nor our diverse group of employees. I want to assure you that the offending employee has been dismissed because of his inappropriate actions. As a result of this incident we are in the process of updating our internal policies so that we may stop any reoccurrence. We understand that the Milwaukee Labor Council has developed a Code of Conduct waiver that has been used on other city jobs. We urge the committee to adopt that for all DPW contractors. We would also be happy to work with the appropriate city staff or area community organizations so that in the future our employees show the appropriate respect for the neighborhoods in which we work.

American Sewer Services' union workforce has worked in every neighborhood in the city for over 30 years. In that time, we have never had a similar incident nor have we had any problems with city residents that weren't able to be resolved through a simple conversation. That's why these latest occurrences have been such a shock to us and why we acted quickly and forcefully to rectify any underlying issues.

I also want to publicly condemn the type of hateful and racist rhetoric that's been circulating on social media and has been leveled against respected members of this committee. There is simply no place in civilized society for such attacks. Please rest assured that no one affiliated with me or American Sewer Services is responsible for any of those posts or attacks. By the same token, I ask that you not judge me, my company nor my employees by the inflammatory things being said about us by people who don't know us or have never done business with us.

There has also been a recent incident with employees of American Sewer Services, Inc. legally carrying handguns on a city job site. Regardless of whether this was prohibited in our contract or not, we are aware of the negative message this sends to the general public, especially when a photo of our employee brandishing a weapon is posted for the world to see. Disciplinary action has been taken against the three employees involved, with the employee who brandished his weapon being terminated. We are aware that the city is considering a policy in which firearms will be prohibited on city job sites. We have every intention to comply with that policy. In the meantime, I have informed all my employees that carrying weapons is prohibited on any City of Milwaukee work sites. It is important to note that my employees who choose to carry a sidearm do not do so just in the City of Milwaukee or in certain neighborhoods. Those employees who choose to legally conceal carry on the job do so regardless of what neighborhood or community they are working in, whether it's Milwaukee or the suburbs.

American Sewer Services looks forward to being involved in any discussions that occur in which the safety of city field employees and contractors is discussed. We understand that the city recently has taken actions to protect your employees in the aftermath of the tragic death of a city worker in the field. We would like to learn from your experience so that our employees may feel safe in any neighborhood to which we are assigned. Like you, the safety of my employees is my number one concern.

American Sewer Services, Inc. has diligently complied with the city's hiring policies, including RPP, by regularly working with the unions who represent our employees, Laborers Local 113 and Operating Engineers 139, to help diversify our work force. Those two unions are represented here today as well as the Milwaukee Labor Council, to show their support for our company and hiring practices. The RPP legislation and our work with the unions has helped us diversify our work force and find employees who live in the City of Milwaukee who will work in the City of Milwaukee. That's a good thing for the city and a good thing for our company. Several of my employees who live in the city and their families have joined me here today. Of our workforce of 22 people, nearly half live in the city of Milwaukee. We've had city residents and minority employees who have worked with our company for years and have happily retired from American Sewer Services. While we are here to discuss and condemn the actions of a few employees, it's important to remember there are dozens of other working union families that have done nothing wrong who fear the loss of their jobs because of some of the things that have been suggested. Many of these are city families that work hard every day, pay their taxes and shop in city neighborhoods. I hope we can all agree that it would be unfair to paint them all with the same brush.

Again, I want to thank you for inviting me here today to engage in this important discussion. I understand that after this hearing there will continue to be work that needs to be done to restore your trust in us. I am committed to continuing that work with your direction and the help of city staff and leadership.