

## Opinion: Los Angeles agency hits the top in arrogance

By Dan Walters

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The Department of Motor Vehicles may be the state agency that Californians love to hate – undeservedly, for the most part.

However, for sheer cussedness and arrogance, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power is in a class by itself.

The DWP, founded in 1902, is infamous for its deceitful acquisition of water rights in the Owens Valley 223 miles north of Los Angeles and the construction of two aqueducts that left the valley a virtual desert.

For decades, the DWP resisted efforts to restore the Owens Valley – even ignoring court orders – and finally gave in only a few years ago, some 80 years after its original seizure of the water.

The conflict inspired the movie “Chinatown” and made Californians north of Los Angeles leery of any new project that might facilitate another Los Angeles water grab – such as the proposed twin tunnels in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

But residents of Los Angeles also feel the adverse impacts of the DWP’s arrogance.

It was revealed recently that the DWP had created two semi-private “trusts” – although that’s not the right word – more than a decade ago into which millions of ratepayer dollars were secreted. These funds were jointly managed by DWP executives and the extremely powerful union that represents agency workers, supposedly to foster worker safety and training.

Two years ago, when the Los Angeles Times began looking into how the money – more than \$40 million – had been spent, it found that details were lacking and that the union was blocking any effort to uncover them. After months of political and legal wrangling, Los Angeles city auditors were granted access to the financial records for 120 days with the odd stipulation that they could take notes but not copy any documents.

However, after the audit began in December, trust fund managers abruptly stopped it, saying the auditors were taking too many notes. And the impasse continues.

Meanwhile, it turns out that while millions of ratepayer dollars were being diverted into these semi-secret trusts, Los Angeles’ water mains, some more than 80 years old, were deteriorating because of age and poor maintenance.

The city has been plagued by a series of water main breaks, replacing the oldest lines would cost \$1.3 billion, and city officials are scrambling to come up with a financing plan.

But as they do, the city is losing an estimated 8 million gallons of water a year from leaky pipes and that \$1.3 billion would simply take care of the water mains in the worst condition, not deal with the continued deterioration of others.

The DWP’s intransigence and mismanagement amount to a major scandal, and the Times is performing a public service by keeping the city’s residents informed.

However, the DWP’s failures must ultimately be laid at the doors of mayors and City Council members who let them happen.

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