

**GRATIOT COUNTY**

# Flint water: For Pine River, many similarities

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**By Linda Gittleman***For the Morning Sun*

By now nearly everyone in the state and nation knows the story: for more than a year, the people in Flint have been drinking water with lead in it.

Finger-pointing is everywhere and people all over the country are calling for the ouster of Gov. Rick Snyder in what's become both a serious hot political potato as well as a health crisis – especially for children, who are most vulnerable to lead poisoning.

In Alma, however, the Flint water crisis has shined a big, bright spotlight on some of the problems Alma and St. Louis have faced for years with the Pine River.

With Flint as the catalyst, at least 150 students and residents showed up at Alma College Monday evening for a community forum.

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## Pine River

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Political Science Professor Dr. Ed Lorenz told the audience that while mid Michigan's problems didn't compare to the acute crisis in Flint, there were still too many similarities.

As a member of the Pine River Superfund Task Force, Lorenz noted the struggle involved in getting the river at St. Louis free of contamination left by the Velsicol Chemical Co.

Even though the river clean up was the most expensive in the Midwest for the Environmental Protection Agency, the plant site - one of three Superfund sites in and around the city - still has yet to be cleaned.

Alma College Geologist Murray Borrello pointed to the problem in dealing with state and federal agencies charged with protecting residents.

"In 2005, the EPA in St. Louis had been measuring the contamination that had been leaking (into the city's drinking water source) and waited a year to tell the city," Borrello said.

St. Louis, part of the Gratiot Area Water Authority, now gets its water from Alma. That project was funded in part by the EPA and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, which has come under fire for the Flint problem, resulting in the resignation of the MDEQ's director.

Unfortunately, the drinking water problems don't end there.

Since Alma gets about 20 percent of its water from the river, the very high and dangerous levels of e-coli now found in the river at Alma have raised serious concerns. Tests done by the college and others - to state standards - indicate the cause is due to agricultural runoff.

"There's no question where (the manure) is coming from," Borrello said. "But the DEQ refuses to acknowledge it."

Indeed, Gary Rayburn, who heads the Healthy Pine River group in Alma, told of his difficulties dealing with the DEQ.

In the first year, he wrote a letter to the DEQ stating that there was a problem with the Pine River at Alma.

He never heard back.

The next year, he wrote another letter and again, received no response.

Finally, after the third

letter, the DEQ responded by saying that due to lack of staffing and resources, the state wouldn't be able to look into the problem until 2031.

The problem, Lorenz noted, with no surprise, is money or lack of it.

"The focus has been on cutting costs," he said. "If all you worry about is cutting costs, there are real consequences."

And Flint, he said, has been likened to the canary in the coal mine.

A member of the audience, Mark Janeczko, said at one time he worked for the state's water department and he took every complaint seriously, although not everyone does.

He cautioned against what he called false arguments.

He said he remembered the hue and cry that occurred when the lead was taken out of gasoline.

Why, jobs would be lost and the cars wouldn't run, people were told

None of that happened, he said.

There are also many people who are against regulations.

"Question those who are against regulations," he urged.

For his part, Micheal Vickery, Alma College Professor of Environmental Studies and Public Affairs pointed to the Public Trust Doctrine, a real and legal responsibility.

"Elected officials are actually responsible for protecting our resources and assets," he said. "They are entrusted to transfer that to the next generation."

But he wasn't only blaming the department heads and elected officials.

"I say we because we are also responsible," he said.

It's the public who votes and wants to pay fewer taxes.

Vickery said he hopes a seed is being planted to get people more actively involved in what the government is doing.

Alma City Manager Phil Moore said after the meeting that its hard to blame one person.

As has been pointed out, Flint didn't have any money.

"You can't just keep defunding cities," he said. "Water, air and the environment are important. The system failed them."

Amid a call for the reformation of the MDEQ, and a strong urge to vote - particularly among the students - Borrello summed up the feelings among most in the room.

State officials it seems, are concerned with "money first and our health second."