

The Hummel Report

You're Fired!

The ex-head of Providence Water conceals one key detail from her new employer

A year ago this month the head of the Providence Water Supply Board was shown the door.

Pamela Marchand had been the general manager of the state's premier water agency for six years, only to arrive at work one day and find out it would be her last. She was being terminated immediately. But nobody would say why, or how much it would cost ratepayers to buy out her contract.

Ten weeks after she was fired, Marchand signed a three-year contract as the new executive director of the Bristol County Water Authority. She called her new position a dream job and nearly every one of the board members who voted unanimously to hire her thought Marchand had left her previous job voluntarily.

Marchand was going to an agency a tenth the size of Providence and taking a 30 percent pay cut, but apparently no one in Bristol County thought to ask why. The Hummel Report has learned that ratepayers will shell out more than a quarter of a million dollars to buy out Marchand's contract by the time it runs out early next year including salary, car allowance, medical and dental payments and unused vacation and holiday pay. She was earning \$180,000 a year at the time of her departure.

It took us six months - and a change in the state's open records law - to obtain the details of her termination. The board refused to comment at the time of her firing and denied our initial request last spring for her contract and termination agreement, saying it was not obliged to produce it under state law, even though public money was involved.

The General Assembly modified the open records law in June to include public employee contracts, and we resubmitted our request. We received the numbers and found out Marchand was terminated without cause, but the paper trail offered no explanation as to why.

Board Chairman Brett Smiley would not answer us directly when we pressed him for a reason.

Smiley: "We made a determination that it was in the best interests of Providence Water and in the best interest of the ratepayers to bring on a new general manager."

Hummel: "But those ratepayers are picking up \$250,000 and many are saying if it's a shift of a opinion, if it's a direction the board wanted to go, don't they deserve an answer what the reason is? We've gotten no reason at all."

Smiley: "The ratepayers of Providence Water have the least expensive water in Rhode Island and we've just gone into our fourth year without requesting a rate hike. So I think the ratepayers of Providence Water are getting excellent water at an amazing value that no other system in the state can provide and should be really pleased with the water that they're getting and the price they're paying for it."

Inside sources tell the Hummel Report that Marchand had a falling out with the new administration and

that Mayor Angel Taveras wanted her out.

So the authority sent a termination notice to Marchand on December 19, 2011, effectively immediately. That meant it had to pay her for 14 months of salary, translating to \$207,000. In addition Marchand received \$700 in car allowance; \$2,675 in medical and dental payments; \$4,769 in holiday pay; and \$41,000 for unused vacation time for a total of \$256,144.

Marchand became a leading contender for the Bristol County Water Authority job following her termination. We were able to reach seven of the nine members who voted to hire her. Only Allan Klepper, who headed the search committee and is now the board chairman, knew Marchand had been terminated. The other six we reached said they did not know she had been fired and apparently no one asked.

The board chairman at the time, John Jannitto, tells the Hummel Report that he thought “she was fed up with what was going on [in Providence] and decided to move out and go to a smaller water authority. That’s the impression she gave.”

Jannitto was quoted at the time of Marchand’s hiring as saying: “She was not removed.” And that if Marchand had been terminated, the board would have found out about it in the vetting process. He told us that if he had known she was fired, it might have changed his mind on hiring her.

Klepper and several other board members we spoke with said they have been pleased by Marchand’s performance in her first eight months on the job. Klepper added that she has extraordinary experience in the water management field. She is earning \$125,000 a year in Bristol County.

Marchand, through her personal lawyer, declined our request for an interview. So we paid her an unannounced visit to her office last month, where she refused to answer our questions and asked us to leave the offices, which are in a public building.

“This is not a discussion,” she told us, before shutting a door and walking away. “You are not welcome here.”

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