

Sex suit just 'waiting to happen'

Water district's 'hostile' workplace out of control: lawyer

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Staff Reporter

An eight-month investigation into alleged sexual harassment at the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District reveals such a hostile sexual environment that officials could one day face a massive lawsuit similar to what occurred at the Downstate Mitsubishi plant.

The report, released Thursday, provided a sobering look at the work environment for 2,200 employees of the district. The allegations include employees having sex in common areas; explicit sexual conversations; a female employee

showing a male co-worker pictures depicting oral sex, and male employees touching female co-workers and asking for oral sex.

"The district's workplace is sexualized to the extent that it is, in general, hostile," said Callie Baird, an attorney who conducted 67 interviews over 400 hours and reviewed 6,000 documents. "... It was so overwhelmingly disturbing that it could not be ignored."

The MWRD is a government agency with responsibilities including flood control for Chicago and 124 of its suburbs and treating wastewater so it can be reused.

Baird, who was hired by the district to conduct the investigation, raises the stakes in the report when she writes: "Our baseline research indicates that past actions and practices at the District are leading this to be a Dial- or Mitsubishi-type class-action lawsuit

waiting to happen."

In April, about 100 women who say they suffered sexual harassment from bosses and co-workers at Dial's soap-making plant near Aurora were offered a \$10 million settlement. Five years ago, Mitsubishi paid \$34 million in a sexual harassment settlement that was distributed among 486 women.

At the district, the number of sexual harassment complaints and substantiated cases is low. Between 1992 and 2003, the district received 11 complaints of sexual harassment, and two were substantiated. Five lawsuits were filed, with one resulting in a settlement. Three are still pending.

Baird investigated nine complaints from women and substantiated two.

The first case involved an operating engineer who touched a female co-worker's genital area while offer-

ing her a massage and also showed her photographs of a massage book with nude photos. In the second case, a male employee repeatedly exposed his penis to a female laborer.

Baird said the low numbers might be deceiving. Her interviews yielded several stories of inappropriate sexual behavior, and she believes a lack of an efficient record-keeping system, fear of retaliation and inconsistency in reporting and investigating have potentially blurred the picture for district officials.

"It becomes difficult to place faith that these numbers truthfully reflect the full picture of the District's status," she wrote.

Other stories that emerged after Baird's interviews included a female employee putting a pretzel down her pants before feeding it to a male employee and male supervisors offering female subordinates

money for sex.

Four employees, including two supervisors who have failed to report allegations, face discipline.

"Maybe we just didn't see it going on," district General Supt. John C. Farnan said after hearing the report.

"Now we've made it very clear to people we will not put up with this, and anybody who does is going to be removed," he said.

The district established a sexual harassment policy in 1986. On Thursday, the board of commissioners voted to hire an independent firm to train employees and supervisors on sexual harassment policies.

Commissioners are reviewing Baird's other recommendations, including clarifying how complaints are handled, establishing more credibility for the process, and creating an anti-harassment task force.