

Mobile Area Water & Sewer System (MAWSS)

News Advisory

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Longtime Board Member Wesley A. James Leaves Legacy at MAWSS

It's hard to imagine Mobile Area Water & Sewer System (MAWSS) without Reverend Wesley A. James in a pivotal role, but his death November 27, at age 58, leaves an open seat on the MAWSS Board and a hole in the hearts of many who came to respect and depend on his leadership. In his twenty plus years on the Board, James left his mark on the organization, guiding the development of policies and procedures that touch the daily lives of everyone at MAWSS. His goal was to make MAWSS a model utility, one that would be able to serve the growing water and sewer needs of the region, care for the environment, respect customers and fairly compensate employees. The MAWSS Board paid tribute to their departed colleague with a Resolution acknowledging his many contributions, some of which were characterized by MAWSS Chair Maynard Odom.

“From a boyhood friend to mentor, Wesley has always demonstrated the same level of superb character with keen wisdom and insight. His way of influencing you with soft-spoken reasoning, his excellent attention to details and his ability for instant and total recall of events were his most admired attributes,” said Odom

James played a significant role in MAWSS' history over the past two decades. He was appointed to the Board of Water and Sewer Commissioners by City Council representative Clinton Johnson on February 13, 1990. He became the first African American to be elected Chair in 1994 and 1995. He was elected to the position again in 2006 and 2007.

James was Chair in 2007 when the MAWSS Board sued the Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT) over the contamination of Big Creek Lake that occurred during construction of Hwy. 98. “Although we regret having to take such legal action, this Board is entrusted with protecting the safety of the water supply, and we intend to be absolute in this duty,” said James at the time. It took several years of negotiations before MAWSS eventually accepted a settlement in the suit, but only after ALDOT made significant environmental improvements in their construction practices to protect the watershed.

It was not the first time James had been involved in negotiations for MAWSS. In 2002, he worked with former Chair D. Mark Nix to negotiate the Consent Decree between MAWSS and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Alabama Department of Environmental Management, Department of Justice and Mobile Bay Watch. The agreement limited punitive damages and allowed for more than \$200 million in wastewater infrastructure upgrades and

repairs. Since that time, MAWSS has won numerous state and national environmental awards attributed to the performance of its treatment plants and operators.

The safety and welfare of employees was always a prime consideration for James. During his tenure on the MAWSS Personnel Committee, he initiated the Drug & Alcohol Policy and Program, developed the Disciplinary Hearing Procedures and Progressive Discipline Policy, began the Training & Development Program and helped identify the concept for the MAWSS Training Center. He also advised the Employee Relations Committee.

Always mindful of the community he represented, James was instrumental in establishing the Small and Underutilized Business Enterprise (UUBE) program to give minority and women owned enterprises opportunities to do business with MAWSS. The program, which has successfully helped minority owned firms become prime contractors with MAWSS, was honored by the Chamber of Commerce in 2004 with the first Minority Business Advocate of the Year Award.

In 2008, when MAWSS and the Utilities Board of the City of Chickasaw united to form the Alabama Gulf Coast Regional Sewer Supply District, James was the founding Chair. He believed regionalizing wastewater treatment was the best option to maximize funds, protect area waters and provide growth opportunities for the Gulf Coast.

“When Wesley entered a cold, dark meeting room, he alone could bring warmth and light to the entire place” said Odom. “With him gone; too many meeting rooms will miss the warm passion for his fellow man and the light of his sharp intellect that was always with him. Rev. James was truly a man committed to serving all of God’s people.”

The Resolution cites his good fellowship, wise counsel and loyalty. It calls him “a model of “servanthood” for our entire community... never failing to stand for the rights of those who could not stand for themselves.”