



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ALABAMA STATE HOUSE
MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA 36130**

DISTRICT NO. 57
JEFFERSON County

MERIKA COLEMAN

POST OFFICE BOX 28888
BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA 35228

OFFICE 205/325-5308

MONTGOMERY 334/242-7755

E-MAIL WWW.merika.coleman@alhouse.org

MEDIA ADVISORY

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Contact: Deidre Ali (205) 834-4937

Valley Creek Employees Give Inside Tour to State Legislator

State Rep. Merika Coleman sees first hand impact of county cuts

BESSEMER AL. – On Tuesday, State Representative Merika Coleman toured the Valley Creek Waste Water Treatment Plant near Bessemer to see up close the real impact of the recent county budget cuts on employees and plant operations.

"Like access health care, access to clean water is a basic human right and a matter of public trust. I wanted to get a better idea of how employees and the citizens of Jefferson County will be impacted by cuts made to the hours and staff at the waste water treatment plant," said Rep. Coleman. "It was important for me to show that this issue is not just a line item in a budget, but a decision that affects real people - both employees and the general public," she added.

Clean Water: A Matter of Public Trust

The tour was guided by the plant's deputy director, Daniel A. White. During the visit, Rep. Coleman had the opportunity to get an inside view of the wastewater treatment process and the essential role the plant plays in public and environmental health. The treated water is discharged

from the plant into a nearby creek where it will be used as a drinking water source for someone downstream. People swim, fish, snorkel, and play in the creeks that the plant's treated water filters into. People around the area have grown to trust that the plant is doing everything to ensure their health and safety.

Robby Bennett, who has served as Plant Manager since 2006, said that because many people do not understand what the plant does and they don't realize the necessity of its service to public health and the environment. "We welcome all people to tour the plant to see first hand what the Environmental Services Department of Jefferson County does and how it contributes to their quality of life," Bennett said.

Challenged To Do More With Less

The Valley Creek plant is currently operating under a \$6.8 million budget, with 70 employees. Despite receiving none of its funding from the occupational tax, the county's Environmental Services Department is still being included in county budget cuts. Already the department has already reduced personnel by over 100 positions to reduce operating costs.

Plant managers state that the plant cannot maintain the same quality in the process while having fewer employees who must still operate the plant around the clock and working only 32 hours as opposed to having a full staff working 40 per week.

The 20 percent cut is only a temporary remedy for the county. According to plant managers, when October comes and the new fiscal year begins, it may not be a matter of cuts, it may be layoffs. The plant's permit requires that it is staffed with certified personnel 24 hours a day 365 days a year. "If we are asked to do a 33% cut as a part of the County's efforts to make up the \$72 million lost from the occupational tax, there will have to be layoffs. Most of the budget is made up of fixed costs like power and equipment maintenance. The only costs that can be trimmed are personnel," he said. As many as 200 of the 488 Environmental Services employees may be laid off. If that is the case, White adds, "the plant won't be impossible to run, but it will be nearly impossible."

Plant managers offer assurance that the last thing that will fall by the wayside is the water quality. They said that some employees have such a strong work ethic and sense of commitment to their jobs and the public safety, that some would offer to sacrifice and work additional unpaid time just to protect the public interest.

The Human Faces Behind The Story

Rep. Coleman is concerned about the ripple effect or social implications will result from the cutbacks. "Often people just don't see the human face behind the story: lost pensions, lost retirements, broken families, foreclosures, and a rise in the need for social services.

Rep. Coleman spoke with plant employees and listened to personal stories of plant workers who had been impacted by the cuts. In a twist of irony, during the tour one an employee who has 28 years of experience with the plant came to get his manager's signature on a Wal-Mart employment application. That employee, who has two daughters in college and one about to go,

stated that he had few options to compensate for the gap in income. Due to the reduction of hours, he would not be able to support his family otherwise.

"People have the tendency to not invest interest in an issue unless they connect the dots to how it will affect them," Coleman adds. "With so much on the line with many of our public assets like water, sewage, roads and hospitals, people must understand that it is in everyone's best interest to realize that ultimately, we are all in this together. Elected official must act now and work across the isle to find a constitutional remedy to this issue."

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