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RUBEN VIVES, ANGEL JENNINGS

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The general manager of a small public agency under fire for delivering brown, smelly water to parts of Compton and Willowbrook has been placed on administrative leave effective immediately, the water district board's attorney announced Thursday night.

Maria Rachele Garza's suspension comes days after The Times reported allegations that the embattled Sativa Los Angeles County Water District hired people to pose as supporters and attend a local congresswoman's town hall regarding complaints of dirty water.

Garza could not be immediately reached for comment. In previous interviews with The Times, she strongly denied knowing anything about hiring people to attend the forum.

After the town hall, the water district issued a statement denying that it paid people to attend the forum and support the district. However, water board President Luis Landeros told The Times on Thursday that the statement was not authorized by the board.

Sativa's board of directors held a special closed-door meeting Thursday and afterward announced Garza was placed on leave with pay pending the outcome of an investigation into the allegations, according to Eduardo Olivo, the board's attorney. Olivo, who will be conducting the inquiry, said Garza makes about \$77,000 annually.

Cole Edwards said in an interview with The Times before the meeting that Sativa hired him to place a Craigslist ad and find paid supporters. The Times reviewed text messages and emails he said he exchanged with Garza, along with a list of questions supporters were to ask at the forum. He said the plan was to hide the water district's involvement. Edwards said he didn't believe the plan was right and thought it should be exposed, so he contacted The Times.

Rep. Nanette Diaz Barragán started the town hall by suggesting that some in the audience had been paid to pose as residents supporting the district, although she did not say who she believed was behind the paid protesters or accuse anyone specifically. She asked anyone who was paid not to participate.

In a video of the forum posted on the congresswoman’s Facebook page, a man who later identified himself to The Times as Kelvin Smith read from a notebook and asked three questions. The material that Edwards provided to The Times before the meeting listed those same three questions, in the same order, and stated that they were assigned to be asked by a “Kelvin Smith.”

Event organizer Kathrina Abrot said in a prior interview that she worked with Garza, whom she identified as her cousin, and Edwards to hire canvassers tasked with finding people to attend the town hall. Abrot said she didn’t know if any of the canvassers spoke at the meeting but that they did not pay people simply to do so.

Garza denied knowing either Edwards or Abrot.

County supervisors Mark Ridley-Thomas and Janice Hahn, who voted in her capacity at another agency to dissolve Sativa, condemned the water district. Ridley-Thomas said in a statement that “if Sativa is indeed attempting to muddy the facts, it would not only be unethical but also unconscionable. Public health — not political maneuvering — should prevail.”

Hahn said Sativa’s goal to “drown out legitimate concerns with paid protesters” is “deplorable behavior and only adds insult to injury.”

Sativa — a tiny agency that serves water to just over 1,600 ratepayers in Compton and Willowbrook — has faced years of complaints from consumers and survived earlier attempts to disband it. The Times in 2013 reported allegations of poor financial oversight and mismanagement at the district, including that the board members had awarded themselves bereavement pay and Christmas bonuses not allowed under state law.

The water quality issue, however, is the most serious challenge yet. Residents have been complaining about discolored water for more than a year.

County officials say the brown water is safe to drink but contains higher than normal levels of manganese. They said the problem comes from aging pipes, and that the district occasionally flushes out sediment that builds up in the system. The pipes need to be replaced in a multimillion-dollar infrastructure project, according to Garza.

A county governing agency voted last week to begin the process of disbanding Sativa. A hearing on the issue is scheduled in July.

Hahn said ousting the general manager would not be enough to ensure the district's survival.

“They have been given enough chances. It is clear that this district was mismanaged but the problems go far beyond leadership issues,” she said.