



OBSERVER CORPS REPORT

Marblehead Municipal Light Commission -4/29/25 at Abbot Hall
LWVM Observer: Maggie Smist

In Attendance:

Light Commissioners: Michael Hull, Jean Jacques Yarmoff, Simon Frechette, Adam Smith- Light Department: Joe Kowalik (General Manager)

-Call to Order at 4:03 pm

Land acknowledgement read and motion to approve minutes from 3/25. Approval of Minutes with a typographical correction.

There was a public comment for clarification on the article from last week's Current regarding strategic vision which is not on the MMLD website. Commissioner Yarmoff stated the strategic vision is in the goals outlined in the Monthly Minutes.

-Outstanding items

Polco survey progress – GM said it is in the second and final week of gathering information from employees.

V13 Substation: Change Orders and updates - GM reported they are still waiting for the switchgear delivery, and delivery will now be the end of May. There is a change order to the substation – they want to construct a land bridge near the Swampscott right of way. Change will be a two-week project and will be with the existing contractor and will affect a sewer main. The GM is asking the Commission for a project change order of no more than \$200k. Discussion and questions were directed to Amy McHugh at the Water and Sewer Department. Motion seconded and passed.

-Voluntary payments by MMLD to the Town of Marblehead

Motion is to approve a voluntary payment to the town for \$360,000 from MMLD's operating income. Jean Jacques Yarmoff explained the MA General Law around payments by MLP's to Towns. Payments must be from surplus. 37 out of 41 towns with MLP's pay the surplus and MMLD is very close to their peers with the average amount of payments. Commissioner Yarmoff is asking for a further review of this

voluntary payment and the formula which will be used in the future. Mr. Yarmoff is asking to accept the GM's recommendation to town of 360k for this year.

Discussion followed with Mike Hull asking to consider in the future having an earmark for projects needed in town – either for MMLD, Water and Sewer, Police Department etc. The commission will re-visit the discussion of the voluntary payment as requested.

Motion moved and approved.

-Open position updates

– Energy Efficiency Marketing Manager – Lisa Wolf has resigned so she can post for this position. The GM read a statement on how he will interview Lisa Wolf and he wants to be sure the process is fair and unbiased. Commissioner Yarmoff said that the GM did a good job of disclosing the situation along the way. Interviews are next week.

- Fleet Maintenance and Facilities Operations Specialist – hired and will begin employment on 5/19.

-Senior Substation and Operations Specialist – qualified candidates are being reviewed.

-General Manager's annual review

In April 2023, Commission evaluated and approved the review process. There will be an oral discussion with the GM and also written impressions by each Commissioner which will then be collated and given to the GM. One item on review needs to be discussed in a closed meeting.

GM provided his comments: his responsibility is to provide an annual report to the town. 2024 was a good year for the MMLD.

The GM reviewed a number of things

- portfolio is now 65% carbon free (55% increase since 2023)

-wholesale power portfolio while delivering a 3.4% decrease in wholesale power costs.

- For the 4TH year in a row the MMLD received a reliability recognition award

-secured a 1.33 million grant and made progress on Village 13 substation upgrade.

-Innovation award was received from MMWEC and an IT manager was hired in 2024.

Unplanned issues handled this year:

-installed unplanned concrete work at Village 13

-completed negotiations for an access easement for Village 13

- met with Lincoln Ave. residents to discuss possible use of land on Tioga Way

-there was a network reliability problem which involved working with multiple vendors.

MMLD also received a \$120,000 grant to reimburse unplanned construction expenses to improve access to Hammond Park and Commercial Street waterfront area.

-Public comments about succession planning for the GM.

Commissioner Hull asked why the GM's contract is not being renewed and is asking about the strategic plan on which the GM was evaluated. It was clarified that the quote in the Current was a 'vision.'

Commissioner Smith said they have been asking for a vision from the GM for a 3-year plan over the since 2023. Commissioner Yarmoff said a subcommittee was set up in 2022-2023 to set goals for the department. He reviewed that team presented future projects, and this has not been calculated into a future budget and financial plan.

The GM said there has been a lack of productive dialogue between the GM and the Board. He is responsible for operations and said pieces are coming together for a vision and long-term plan. Commissioner Yarmoff replied that the Board can't put forth a plan, and there have been obstacles to communication.

The GM discussed the daily obstacles with department driven projects and the challenge to filling open positions. He says the board gets needlessly impatient and Commissioner Yarmoff stated the Board is not impatient with execution – the Board is impatient with planning by the GM.

In October 2024, a decision was made by the Board, after discussion, to not renew the current GM's contract. He is not being fired, and the Commission wants to do right by GM Kowalik. The commissioners are looking for continuity within the department and want to encourage him to stay until the end of his contract. The GM stated he asked for extension of contract and reiterated that he thinks expectations are unrealistic. The GM stated he doesn't agree with their decision, but he will stay as acting GM thru April 2026. Commissioner Yarmoff stated that the GM has been gracious during this process.

Amy McHugh said GM Kowalik has brought departments back together during his tenure. She asked Commissioners to keep things working well, and she also acknowledged the contribution of the Board.

There was a question about the MMLD breaking open meeting laws. Mr. Yarmoff stated they are definitely not breaking open meeting laws and he outlined the goals of the board.

-Process to Interview Candidate for MMLD General Manager

The Board wanted to know which MLD's have replaced a GM recently. Commissioner Yarmoff said there have been 12 MLD's who have replaced GM's and in 8 there were people who were being groomed for the position. The remaining 4 told MMLD the hiring process should start one year before position needs to be filled.

A possible candidate from Ipswich (Jon Blair) is known to a few commissioners due to a prior engagement on a separate issue in late 2023. Commissioner Yarmoff discussed the candidate's work with MMWEC and his other qualifications. Yarmoff wanted to interview at the 4/29 meeting, but the Board realized they needed to come up with the process.

Public comments were directed towards the Board not having a written vision or job description so interviews should not happen quickly. Per the Board, the job description was put together in March 2025 and is ready to be posted if the Board wants it posted. Commissioner Frechette commented that the MMLD should post for a month and decide when to have a public interview process. A subcommittee should be formed first to come up with top 3 candidates first if there are more than 3 applicants. Thatcher Kezer, the town HR Director and a sitting board member could make up the subcommittee.

There was a public comment showing unhappiness with Thatcher Kezer being on any sub-committee.

Leah Blander from the Current asked if there was a rush and what is planned for a hire date and will there be overlap with current GM? Leah asked about a timeline. Planned for hire date is 4/26 and the Board stated they can only hire a GM and not an Assistant GM.

In summary -- a subcommittee will choose 3 finalists if there are more than 3 candidates. At that point, the finalists would be interviewed by the Board. Job description will be posted after a final review by the commissioners this week and possible candidates can come forth over next month.

Qualifications were reviewed in detail and are on the MMLD recording and will be available soon after the meeting. Comment from distribution manager is that they need to find someone who can handle real-time things the department needs on the ground. He emphasized the importance of delivery of electricity to the townspeople.

There was a question about POLCO survey – how will the information be evaluated? Aggregate results will be brought to Board and then provided to employees.

Board clarified that they initially asked for POLCO survey in 2023 when there was a question about the timing of the survey in 2025.

Adjourned at 6:03 pm