

# 2024's Worst Offenses Against GEORGIA'S WATER



## FLINT RIVER

### Monkey Breeding Facility in Bainbridge Exposes “Monkey Business” Potential of Local Development Authorities

#### INTRODUCTION

Imagine a quasi-public agency that has the ability to obligate public assets including taxes, land, roads, buildings and services to private businesses. Now, imagine that same agency is not elected or accountable to voters. Then imagine that deals these agencies broker can be made in complete secrecy. As you might imagine, within such agencies there are plenty of opportunities for monkey business. That’s the situation among the state’s more than 350 local industrial and economic development authorities whose job it is to woo new businesses. In southwest Georgia earlier this year, the Development Authority of Bainbridge and Decatur County landed in hot water over some real monkey business when residents discovered the authority had brokered a secret deal to provide a sweetheart loan, tax breaks and more to a monkey breeding facility. If built, the facility would ultimately house as many as 30,000 primates to sell for medical research—more monkeys than there are people in Decatur County. The deal was cloaked in secrecy and the public was not privy to the plan until many of the aspects of the agreement with the company were signed. The backlash from residents was immediate. Concerned about loss of property values, spread of infectious diseases and the impacts to natural resources including the Flint River, citizens crammed city and county commission meetings. Within two months of approving the deal, elected officials yielded to public pressure and rescinded their decisions. Lawsuits are now pending that will decide the breeding facility’s fate, but this monkey business underscored a long-running complaint about local development authorities: that they lack accountability and transparency; are ripe for corruption; and foist projects on communities that threaten local quality of life, strain local budgets, diminish property values and wreck natural resources.

#### THE WATER BODY

Perhaps the state’s most unique river, the Flint courses 346 miles from metro Atlanta (it flows in a pipe beneath the runways of Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport) to southwest Georgia where it joins the Chattahoochee to form the Apalachicola River in Florida. When the Flint arrives in southwest Georgia it interacts with the limestone of the Dougherty Plain with spectacular results. Limestone bluffs front the river and breathtakingly cold and beautiful



The Flint River flows for some 42 miles through Decatur County and is a signature natural feature of the community. When residents learned of the proposed monkey breeding facility with plans to discharge treated effluent to the Flint River, they organized to protest the secret deal.



blue hole springs rise up along its flanks to feed it. Meanwhile, a host of fish and wildlife call it home, including the shoal bass, the state's official riverine sport fish, which attracts anglers from across the globe. For Bainbridge and Decatur County, the Flint and Lake Seminole which it feeds are top tourist attractions and economic drivers, bringing thousands of professional anglers, duck hunters and other nature-based tourists to the region annually.

## THE DIRT

The saga of Bainbridge's monkey business is reminiscent of many local development authority deals that have flaunted public accountability. Dubbed "Project Liberty" by the Bainbridge-Decatur County authority, the secret project did indeed take liberties with the rights of local taxpayers.

Wooed by the promise of a \$396 million facility and more than 200 local jobs, the Development Authority of Bainbridge and Decatur County promised Safer Human Medicine, the company behind the project, 200 acres of prime industrial property near the Flint River for just \$10, a free sewer hookup, a \$300 million bond at six percent interest backed by local taxpayers and full and partial tax abatements on the property for 19 years. The total incentives package amounted to seven times the City of Bainbridge's annual property tax revenue. Critically, the authority signed non-disclosure agreements that kept the plan hidden from the public until the agreement was signed. The Decatur County Commission actually violated state open meetings laws by approving the tax abatement deal without public notice.

Once the deal became public, residents held captive both city and county commissions.

They raised concerns about impacts to property values, risks of communicable diseases (the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention considers the primates a public health concern), escapes from the facility and the consequences of the more than 400,000 gallons of wastewater created by the facility daily. The effluent—which would amount to about 30 percent of treatment capacity at the county's industrial park—would ultimately be discharged to the Flint River. The site is also very vulnerable to dangerous tropical storms and hurricanes, plus flooding, leading to increased chances of power outages, waste-elimination failures, disease release, and animal escape.

City and county commissions—along with the development authority—quickly reversed course, rescinding their approvals of the tax deals, but now Safer Human Medicine has filed suit to save its controversial project. Meanwhile, local citizens have filed additional suits in opposition to the project.

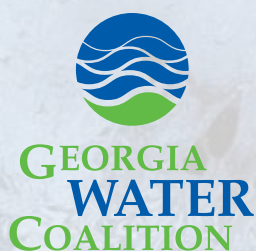
What has happened in Bainbridge will undoubtedly happen again unless development authorities are held more accountable. While such bodies have benefited many communities with good, sustainable growth, the lure of economic development projects, especially in economically-depressed rural areas, can lead to some of the riskiest propositions—for local taxpayers and the area's natural resources.

## WHAT MUST BE DONE

Given chronic abuses of power by local development authorities, the Georgia General Assembly should enact reforms that will hold locally-appointed members of these development authorities more accountable. Secrecy encourages bad behavior, thus reforms should include measures to make development deals more transparent and ensure that residents have a say in which economic development projects are supported with local tax dollars.



Citizens protest the proposed "monkey farm" outside Bainbridge's city offices. The deal struck between Safer Human Medicine and the Development Authority of Bainbridge and Decatur County was kept hidden from the public until key portions of the agreement were already signed by local officials. Upon learning of the plan, residents flooded city and county commission meetings; local officials have now rescinded their decisions to approve the development.



## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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