

Modernize Management

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The Beaumont-Cherry Valley Water District's auditing failures and questionable employee policies signal slipshod administration and lax oversight. It is time for the Board of Directors to bring management of the 89-year-old district up to 21st century professional standards.

Completing overdue audits of the district's finances would be a good start on more competent operations. The agency, now under pressure from the Riverside County auditor-controller's office, says it hopes to have audits for 2004 through 2006 audits finished soon.

Still, the failure to complete a yearly audit since 2003 is inexcusable for any public agency. An annual audit offers the most basic safeguard for ratepayers, providing a check on corruption, mismanagement and misuse of public money.

The water district has also come under scrutiny for employee policies, such as providing free housing and utilities for four top managers. District board member Blair Ball says utilities, housing and labor at the four houses has cost ratepayers \$405,000 since 1999, though district management disputes that figure.

The district says the free housing provides security for nearby water facilities and quick response in emergencies. But that does not explain why other Southern California water districts that offer employee housing charge rent, and the Beaumont-Cherry Valley district does not.

And an employer paying educational costs in return for a worker committing to long-term employment is not all that unusual. But the board approved the deal for a high-level employee's son in closed session, without a public vote, which only raises questions about the arrangement. A full public discussion could have helped defuse issues of nepotism, and avoided trampling on the state's open meeting laws.

The details do matter in conducting public business. "Good enough for government work" is a sardonic joke, not an operating model for a water district.