



COLLINS LAW PLLC

January 10, 2025

Sent via Email Only to: <rbird@mt.gov>

Chief Justice Cory Swanson
c/o Rob Bird
Office of Court Administrator
P.O. Box 203005
Helena, MT 59620-3005

Re: Water Court Chief Water Judge Vacancy—Public Comment in Support of Applicant Anna Stradley

Dear Chief Justice Swanson,

I write in support of applicant Anna Stradley for the Water Court Associate Water Judge vacancy position. As a former Montana Supreme Court Law Clerk, a former Water Master at the Montana Water Court, and now a private practitioner I am familiar with the qualities necessary that make a “good judge.” It is my belief that Senior Water Master Anna Stradley has the experience, temperament, integrity, intelligence, and knowledge that are required to be successful in this role. I note that you have a fine selection of candidates to choose from and I do not envy your tough decision ahead. Montana will be well-served by the appointment any of the candidates; but, after review of all candidates, I provide my support to those who have a distinct edge for the reasons that follow.

I first met and know Anna as colleagues at the Water Court and as friends. When I joined the Water Court Anna had 10 years of experience. Anna did not hesitate to provide mentorship and guidance to new Water Masters, including myself. Anna became a sounding board for me to address complex needs of a given case, or any other work-related issue. During my years at the Water Court the Water Masters all worked very well alongside each other in the “trenches” of adjudication, of which Anna provided an instrumental leading role. You would often hear her say “it’s a great day to adjudicate a water right”—and she meant it.

In her role as Senior Water Master she has always willingly taken on additional responsibility as indicated in her cover letter and résumé. Anna’s candidacy for this position is benefited from her truly impressive commitment to serving Montana through her now 18 years at the Water Court. She directly benefited from the tutelage of the longest serving Chief Water Judge, Judge Loble. More than any other candidate, during her 18 years Anna has seen what has worked and has not worked well directly from the inside of the Water Court, and she will be able to apply that knowledge to the role of Associate Water Judge.

Anna understands the complexities of water law and the need for thorough legal research and fact-finding to reach a decision. She is aware of the need for timely decision-making so that water users can move forward with their lives. It should be noted that Anna has lived the life of

an agricultural water user and understands first-hand the intricacies of water use in arid Montana as a generational farmer-rancher. This is a distinct perspective that sets her apart from most.

Beyond the knowledge required to be a judge, Anna possesses the appropriate demeanor for a judge. She is calm, thoughtful, thorough, poised, and demonstrates confidence in her decisions. She is also kind, approachable, and is respectful to others. She is willing to listen and consider all points of view. Through her volunteer work with low-income family law litigants at Gallatin Legal Assistance Clinic, Anna has demonstrated a willingness to learn and grow her body of legal knowledge and experience even outside of her career area of practice.

As mentioned, while the candidates who have applied for this position are all of undoubted quality, I note Anna's importance to the Water Court in general. The Water Court performs an essential role for the State of Montana and the area of law is complex. It is a unique judicial institution that interacts with a state agency and pro se litigants differently than any other court in the State. It is unquestionable that Anna has dedicated her career to the mastery of water law, and specifically at the Water Court. By allowing Anna to advance in her career from Senior Water Master to Associate Water Judge we all would benefit by the retention of her remarkable institutional knowledge and her commitment to public service.

In sum, I do not hesitate to support Anna in appointment as Associate Water Judge. If you should have any questions in this regard, please do not hesitate to contact me at your convenience. Your attention to this matter is appreciated.

Sincerely,
COLLINS LAW PLLC

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Andrea Collins".

[electronically signed]
Andrea Collins