

EUGENE WATER & ELECTRIC BOARD
WORK SESSION
EWEB BOARD ROOM
500 EAST 4TH AVENUE
OCTOBER 6, 2009
5:30 P.M.

Commissioners Present: John Brown, Vice President; Bob Cassidy, Rich Cunningham, Joann Ernst.

Commissioners Absent: Ron Farmer, President.

Others Present: General Manager Randy Berggren, Sheila Crawford, Lance Robertson, Jim Wiley, Jim Origliosso, Debra Smith, Cathy Bloom, Tom Buckhouse, Terry Bequette, Dick Helgeson, Gene Austin, Mark Freeman, Eric Hiaasen, John Yanov, Patty Boyle, Tony Toncray, Mike Logan, Jennifer Joule, Wendi Schultz-Kerns, Joe Harwood, David Churchman, Jeannine Parisi, Will Bondioli, Edward Yan, Kim Spear, Steve Mangan, and Judy Chase of the EWEB staff; Kim Young, City of Eugene minutes recorder.

Vice President Brown convened the work session of the Eugene Water & Electric Board (EWEB).

Customer Complaint Process

Debra Smith, Director of the Employee, Customer & Community Services Division, explained that staff had reviewed the minutes of the meeting at which this topic had previously been discussed and had incorporated Board feedback into the memorandum provided to the Board entitled *Customer Complaint Process*, dated *October 6, 2009*. She reiterated that Lane County used three agencies to administer the EWEB limited income programs and that October 1 was the “reset” date. She said it was a very busy time and as of October 5, both the Celeste Campbell Senior Center and St. Vincent dePaul were out of appointments for the month of October. She stated that the only agency that still had some energy aid to disperse was the Catholic Community Services and they served the Springfield and upriver client base. She encouraged any board members who were receiving complaints from people who were not able to get through for assistance to let them know that they should try again on November 1.

Ms. Smith provided a power point presentation entitled *Customer Service Complaint Process*, hard copies of which were made available to those present. She said staff was proposing a new process that meant it would work to keep the Commissioners informed of complaints, so they could track the number of complaints that initiate with the Board. She stated that the Board was now receiving a fairly detailed reporting package relative to collections activity and staff was able to provide the Board with annual or quarterly reports on claims activities.

Commissioner Cassidy thanked staff for the reports on electricity disconnects. He believed the Board’s job should be to track this type of thing. He appreciated the pages of

compliments that had been provided, but he thought they might be a little bit much. He requested a link to the guidelines.

Commissioner Cassidy referred to the complaints for the Water Division and the fact that the majority appeared to have been approved by the Review Committee. He felt that staff on the street should be able to make those judgments without going through the committee. Mark Freeman, Customer Service Manager, indicated that the majority of the complaints were related to water leaks and a few years earlier the Board had agreed to no longer provide those types of adjustments for customers. He noted that a majority of the complaints were irrigation leaks located on the customer's side of the meter. He said once the decision had been made, customers who were used to being able to receive a credit, had begun appealing that policy. He explained that they had created a way to accommodate them by only charging Tier 1 rates for water lost through leakage.

In response to a question from Commissioner Cassidy, Mr. Freeman clarified that St. Vincent dePaul also had its own assistance funding that people could apply for.

Commissioner Ernst thanked staff for the information. She believed that it pointed to the fact that EWEB was a public utility and that rate payers were a part of this. She asked if there was a way to allow some give and take in the fees that had to be paid to restore electrical service and if the process could be "blended" into the complaint process. Ms. Smith responded that one of the things they struggled with was balancing the customers with limited income with the economic impacts on the general rate customers as a whole. She said the crisis money was available with "very few strings attached" and staff had the flexibility to use money to help customers to remain in their homes and to address other hardship issues. She understood that collection activity could trigger a deposit, but the purpose of the deposit was to protect the rest of the ratepayers who paid their bill every month.

Mr. Freeman added that every customer service analyst was empowered to make the decision on what degree of help a person could receive. He said they tried to find ways within the programs and the leeway they had to determine the easiest path to get a customer's power restored.

Commissioner Cunningham noted that the materials suggested that if a Commissioner received an operational complaint, he or she should have the option of notifying the General Manager by email. He asked if they had considered having the Commissioners notify someone "at the lowest possible level." Ms. Smith responded that the General Manager was the Board's employee. She explained that the idea behind having the email sent to General Manager Randy Berggren, with copies to Judy Chase and herself, was to maintain a record of them. She added that General Manager Randy Berggren liked to know when staff members were interacting with Commissioners.

Commissioner Cunningham observed that the Board was receiving compliments and commendations by a two to one or three to one margin against complaints. Ms. Smith said staff's concern had been that the Commissioners were receiving the "bad news and not seeing the good news."

Board members agreed that the complimentary feedback could be submitted to them via email.

General Manager Randy Berggren reiterated that emails went to him for tracking purposes, but he did send them right off to staff.

Commissioner Cunningham asked how shut-offs were trending. Mr. Freeman responded that collection activity had declined in September/October, but this was attributable to the increase of activity caused by the return of the University students.

Commissioner Ernst asked how many of the complaints were generated by University students. Mr. Freeman replied that most complaints from students had to do with roommate situations, largely when one roommate was stuck with a bill. Ms. Smith added that students were not large users of the appeal system. Mr. Freeman suggested that they could track who was generating complaints because there was a slot on the form related to occupation.

Commissioner Cassidy asked if the wastewater portion of the bill ended up in the collections department. Mr. Freeman replied that the water utility bill non-payment was becoming enough of an issue that EWEB had created a separate door-hanger that was specific to the water service and explained that the electric bill was paid, but the water bill was not. Ms. Smith noted that the water utility would be paying their share of the job loss program going forward. Mr. Freeman added that EWEB paid approximately \$30,000 to \$35,000 annually for the wastewater portion of the bill, not reimbursed by the Metropolitan Wastewater Management Commission (MWMC).

Ms. Smith recognized Wendi Schultz-Kerns, who was sitting in the audience, for her work on the voluntary fuel fund contributions. She said EWEB "leaned" on those funds for meeting the gaps. She noted that Ms. Schultz-Kerns supervised the limited income programs, cash accounting, and the atrium staff.

Vice President Brown asked for an example of how staff had engaged the public. Lance Robertson, Public Affairs Manager, replied that staff had developed, in response to the Neighborhood Leadership Council's inquiry, principles and guidelines for what a customer could expect when he or she had a complaint. He said the principles had been implemented in July and were currently in place. Ms. Smith stated that previously EWEB had initiated an annual benchmark survey, but this had been eliminated in a budget cut. She said they typically conducted a customized survey for only customers that had interactions with staff, but this also had not been done in the present year because of budgetary constraints. Mr. Freeman added that the customized survey alternated years, targeting anyone who had interactions with the customer service staff one year and only those who had received final notices or had been disconnected the next.

Vice President Brown asked if EWEB was doing anything proactively to engage the development community to aid them with some of the misunderstandings they had, primarily in regard to the deposit policies. Mr. Freeman said staff had taken some of the advice from dialogue with the development community and, for one example, now allowed someone to personally guarantee their Limited Liability Corporation (LLC) based on that input. Ms. Smith

related that staff had also gone to the Chamber of Commerce and had talked about what they were doing with deposits, in an attempt to reach commercial businesses. Additionally, she said special training had been provided to customer service analysts who were working with property managers and commercial deposits in order to enable staff to better provide solutions. Vice President Brown noted that he had not heard any complaints from the business community recently.

In response to a follow-up question from Vice President Brown, Mr. Freeman stated that the subsidies were at the same level regardless of the level of energy efficiency, which affected cost, in a customer's home.

Vice President Brown remarked that he wanted the "good stuff and the bad stuff." He said if employees were receiving compliments, he wanted to know about it.

Mr. Freeman said some of the best suggestions for improvements came from the customers and they intended to keep listening to them and to be "as nimble" as possible to institute changes.

Vice President Brown adjourned the work session at 6:07 p.m.

Assistant Secretary

President