



MEMORANDUM

EUGENE WATER & ELECTRIC BOARD
EMPLOYEE CUSTOMER & COMMUNITY SERVICES DIVISION



TO: Commissioners Farmer, Brown, Cassidy, Cunningham and Ernst
FROM: Debra Smith
DATE: October 6, 2009
SUBJECT: Customer Complaint Process

Issue Statement:

There is a need to develop a more structured procedure for resolving, tracking and communicating operational-level complaints or comments received by commissioners.

Background and discussion:

Commissioners have expressed a desire to develop guidelines or protocols for how to handle customer complaints or inquiries that are received through e-mails, phone calls, face-to-face contact or during the public input time during Board meetings.

Complaints directed to EWEB staff

Currently, complaints directed to individual departments at EWEB are handled by the group responsible for the underlying issue. For example, a customer may call Customer Service with a complaint about tree trimming; that complaint is routed to the utility arborist for resolution. In some cases, the arborist may seek advice and help from Public Affairs, if the issue appears to involve more than a single customer.

There are two formal processes for certain kinds of complaints that cannot be resolved by the department responsible for the underlying issue. Billing complaints have an appeals process, in which a group of EWEB employees from a variety of departments have authority to resolve a customer's electric or water billing issue. Appeals are filed by customers who do not feel that their billing concerns were adequately addressed by individual customer service staff.

Year to date 2009, there have been 138 billing appeals filed, resulting in a total of \$17,679 in credits to customers. The details of these appeals are:

- Fees/Rates 4 Appeals Amount Adjusted: \$ 337.50
- Billings 13 Appeals Amount Adjusted: \$664.00
- Water 72 Appeals Amount Adjusted: \$11,863.29
- Electric 5 Appeals Amount Adjusted: \$78.04

- Deposit 18 Appeals Amount Adjusted: \$2,135.92
- Customer Care 26 Appeals Amount Adjusted: \$2,600.00

As you can see, half of the appeals have been from Water, mainly water leaks, resulting in 67 percent of the credits to customers.

The second process involves customer claims that EWEB’s actions have damaged property. These usually are investigated by a third-party claims investigator hired by EWEB. The investigator makes a recommendation to EWEB Corporate Services staff. Claims are resolved either by a monetary offer or denial by EWEB. Customers who are not satisfied have the option of seeking resolution through the legal system.

In 2008, there were 291 liability claims filed, and EWEB paid out \$175,438. Twelve claims were denied. However, many claims are closed before final resolution, usually because the customer fails to continue the process with documentation that would help determine the validity of a claim.

EWEB also has developed guidelines and procedures for what customers can expect from employees when they have a complaint or disagreement. These procedures were developed and adopted by EWEB in response to a suggestion by the Neighborhood Leaders Council, following the collapse of a transmission tower near Covey Lane during a wind storm. These procedures are intended to guide EWEB employees as they work through specific customer complaints or issues. These guidelines have been posted on the web site at www.eweb.org (under both “Call Customer Service” and “Contact Us”).

EWEB staff has begun providing copies of e-mails and other documentation of customer appreciations as a way of making sure the Board has a more balanced view of customer interactions with Customer Service and other departments at EWEB. The annual Benchmark Survey continues to show a very high level of customer satisfaction, with around 80 percent giving EWEB very good to excellent satisfaction rankings. An extremely low percentage of customers (less than 2 percent) give EWEB low rankings in satisfaction.

EWEB’s intent is to resolve as many complaints or issues as possible at the time of the customer contact (phone call, in-person visit, e-mails). For example, Customer Service Analysts have the flexibility to waive certain fees for customers under certain conditions. All CSAs and other employees are undergoing Critical Thinking training to assist them in decision-making at the initial customer-contact level.

Several other recent actions should reduce customer complaints. Customer call volume has increased substantially since the economic crisis began. Maintaining the appropriate staffing levels in Customer Service is important to reduce wait times and dropped call volume. EWEB recently launched a feature that allows customers to use a debit or credit card to pay bills using the new automated phone system. The Board’s recent approval of a more flexible Community Care assistance program also will help.

In addition, EWEB is exploring the idea of using an independent mediation service to resolve complex issues and claim disputes. Staff is just in the initial stages of exploring this option.

Complaints directed to Commissioners

It is EWEB staff's desire that Board members continue to field inquiries about policy-level decisions that the Board has made or may make in the future. Staff is available to provide background information when appropriate. However, there is a need to develop a more structured procedure for how commissioners relay operational-level complaints or comments to appropriate EWEB staff, and then get information back to commissioners about how a complaint was handled and/or resolved.

Recommendation:

EWEB staff proposes the following guidelines and procedures for complaints received by commissioners:

- When a commissioner receives an operational-level complaint, he or she has the option of notifying the General Manager via e-mail. The commissioner should include the original e-mail from the customer, if applicable. The General Manager's secretary (currently Judy Chase) and the Employee, Customer and Community Services Division Director (Debra Smith) should be copied on all e-mails.
- The GM's secretary will log the complaint and send an e-mail back to the full Board, letting commissioners know that a complaint has been received, the nature of the complaint/comment, and that it is being researched or investigated. This is intended to avoid duplication should multiple commissioners receive a complaint from the same customer.
- The General Manager will assign responsibility for investigating or resolving the complaint to appropriate staff. The ECCSD director will assign responsibility in the GM's absence. The GM's secretary will make note of the assignment in a complaint log.
- The EWEB staff member assigned to the complaint shall inform the customer that his or her complaint is being looked into. Property damage complaints are likely to be assigned to EWEB's normal claims process, while billing issues are likely to be handled through EWEB's regular appeals process.
- Staff will investigate the complaint, resolve the complaint if appropriate, and follow up directly with the customer. If a commissioner wishes to follow up with the customer, he or she should make that preference known at the time the complaint is initially forwarded to the General Manager.
- After the customer is contacted, an e-mail will be sent to the full Board, explaining how the issue was resolved.
- The GM Secretary will update the complaint log with the resolution and date of customer contact.
- The Board will receive a quarterly report showing all complaints received, resolved and the date of customer contact.

Requested Action:

No action requested at this time. If you have questions, please call me at 685-7196 or 517-2805.