

Commissioner's Corner

Customer Involvement Fuels Changes at the PUD

By Russell E. Olsen, PUD Commissioner

The end of the year and beginning of a new year are great times to review past accomplishments and set goals, review processes and practices, and set new expectations of our utility.

2019 was a very productive year for Thurston PUD. The year-end totals are still coming in, but we estimate that we invested over \$600,000 of parts and materials into improving our water systems. These improvements are identified in our Asset Management Plan and the estimations do not include labor costs.

Here are some highlights of projects that were completed in 2019:

- The field operations team completely metered the Timberline Village water system and installed meters on many other water systems. The PUD secured grants and low interest loans to help pay costs of improving and metering water systems.
- An automated phone system was implemented that reduces wait times in the holding queue and frees up customer service representatives to assist customers that have questions that do not involve making a payment.
- The Utility Rate Advisory Committee (URAC) successfully completed its first year as a committee. They made several recommendations that were approved by the PUD Commissioners that PUD staff will implement in 2020. These include: 1) A significant revision of the rate structure through the implementation a fifth rate tier that will allow customers to use more water for less money, 2) The introduction of budget billing, a program that will allow customers the ability to average their payments over the year so summer bills are not so challenging, and 3) Converted consumption usage on bills that show customers actual water usage in cubic feet **and in gallons**.
- We upgraded our customer account software system to further protect your personal information.
- The District successfully passed the financial audits conducted by the Washington State Auditor's Office with no significant findings.



Russell E. Olsen
Commissioner, District 2

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Thurston PUD Commissioners

District 1

Linda Oosterman





District 2

Russell E. Olsen

District 3

Chris Stearns

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2020 Rates, Fees, Charges and Surcharges

In October, the Thurston PUD Board of Commissioners voted to adopt rates which took effect on January 1, 2020. After numerous public hearings and public meetings in the District's three major counties, Thurston, Pierce and Lewis, the Commissioners passed a budget that includes rates recommended through a rate study conducted earlier in the year. There is also a change to the monthly capital surcharge that goes towards critical infrastructure projects throughout all water systems. The capital surcharge is a critical investment in aging infrastructure and regulatory compliance that ensures we do not compromise the financial health of the District.

PUD staff plan and prepare for expenses and revenues annually. To ensure we can meet customer and operational needs we do both short-term (annual budgets and rate setting) and long-term planning (Asset Management planning).

When setting rates this year, our team, with the help of a rate study firm determined several factors for the change in rates:

Uniform Rates Commitment Fulfilled

Since 2017, the PUD had several varying rate structures due to the acquisition of a private water company. The District committed to transitioning all PUD customers to a uniform rate over the course of three years.

Removal of Out-of-County Rates

The 2020 budget includes the completion of another transition that removes out-of-county differentials. The removal is based on a request presented by out-of-county customers to Commissioners for consideration and approval.

Customer Feedback Rates

The District was able to use customer feedback to influence this year's rate structure. As a public utility, we operate as a not-for-profit organization where our customers are also owners. This makes a big difference in our priorities. So when a group of customers who consume high volumes of water each summer approached our Commissioners wanting to use more water for less money, we immediately went to work to find a way to make this happen. The 2020 rate structure now includes a fifth tier which means that those customers who choose to use between 3,000 -7,000 cubic feet (22,440-52,360 gallons) of water in a month can do so at lower rates than the 2019 rate structure.

Capital Projects on the Horizon

Multiple improvements and upgrades are anticipated to begin this year. The PUD plans to spend \$120,000 in water treatment upgrades at several water systems as well as \$250,000 in well and booster pump replacements. From pressure tanks to electrical controls, the PUD plans to invest over \$3 million in capital improvement projects for 2020. Capital projects are funded by a combination of the capital surcharge, low-interest loans, secured grants and other revenues.

Continued Service Excellence

Although our infrastructure is a great asset, our greatest assets are our employees. We needed to ensure that we were compensating our experienced and skilled staff competitively and according to industry standards. Fair and equitable compensation is a tool that will help ensure we keep your taps flowing. We know our employees will continue to be motivated, produce high quality work, identify with the mission of the organization, take responsibility and collaborate.

All of these key factors and initiatives that went into impacting this year's budget will enable continued safe, reliable water service to our customers.

To review the 2020 Adopted Budget and Rate Schedules, please visit www.ThurstonPUD.org.

Employee Spotlight: Staci Mozee

Staci has been employed as a Customer Service Representative with Thurston PUD since February 2019. While she has a background in utility service, this is the first time Staci has worked in the water industry. She notes, “I have learned so much, and I have met some amazing people.”

Outside of work, Staci’s hobbies include spending time with her children, streaming video games, and cheering on the San Francisco 49ers. Staci is looking forward to celebrating her first anniversary of employment with Thurston PUD this February – we look forward to working with Staci and her friendly attitude.

Staci encourages customers to take advantage of the PUD’s electronic payment methods. We offer several ways to pay – there are no fees to pay online, over the phone, or with any of the PUD’s automatic payment services (Auto Pay or Direct Debit service). Call us anytime at (866) 357-8783 or visit our website at www.ThurstonPUD.org.



Staci Mozee, Customer Service Representative

Prevent Your Pipes from Freezing

As Winter progresses, we can see freezing temperatures here in the Pacific Northwest. Freezing temperatures can lead to frozen and burst pipes, which can be costly to repair.

Below are some tips you can utilize to keep your pipes from freezing.

- Keep the heat on. The temperature plummets at nighttime, so it’s important to keep those pipes warm. While keeping your thermostat at a constant temperature may increase your heating bill, the cost of repairing a burst pipe typically would be more.
- Identify pipes susceptible to the cold. Open cabinet doors anywhere with exposed pipes such as in the kitchen, bathroom, basements, and unheated rooms to allow warm air to circulate in those areas.
- If you have a water supply in the garage keep the garage door closed to try and avoid heat from escaping in excess.
- Disconnect any garden hoses connected to outside faucets and drain the water in the pipes leading to outdoor systems, such as irrigation.



- If you are wary a pipe might freeze, you can turn on the faucet connected to that pipe just a little to allow water to drip. This will help prevent water from freezing, or if the pipe froze, this will relieve the pressure which is the culprit of a pipe bursting.
- If you are a Snowbird, or plan on taking an extended vacation, you can call us to get your water shut off at the meter. Please call our office at (360) 357-8783 and allow us up to three business days to turn off your meter. Also, please give us a three day notice to get water turned back on upon your return home.

“Project Help” Low-Income Assistance Program

Our “Project Help” program is available to low-income, Thurston PUD customers to avoid water service disconnection. The program was recently opened to all low-income customers, including customers that rent or lease. If you are a low-income customer in need, please visit our website at www.ThurstonPUD.org for an application or call us at (866) 357-8783. If you would like to donate to the “Project Help” program, please complete the following information, and mail back to our office.

I authorize Thurston PUD to bill my account \$ _____.

- One-time only
- Each month

This authorization shall remain in effect until the PUD receives written notification from me to terminate this agreement. I understand that if my account becomes past due, this authorization becomes invalid.

Name: _____ Account No.: _____

Service Address: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

3 Simple Ways to Recognize a PUD Employee

Scams are everywhere. While some scammers can hide behind a phone call or a fake website, others can show up right at your doorstep. Here are some tips for recognizing a PUD employee:

- Some uniforms may vary, but field technicians will have some article of clothing with the PUD logo.
- All PUD field technicians carry a PUD-issued identification card.
- All PUD field technicians are assigned vehicles that are clearly marked with the PUD logo.



If you're unsure, feel free to ask any PUD employee for their identification. Look for PUD clothing and a vehicle that is clearly marked with the Thurston PUD logo. Call us at (360) 357-8783 to verify the identity of a PUD employee.

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- Commissioners voted to expand the Low-Income Assistance Program to include renters. An application to donate to the program can be found above. To enroll in the program, please call us at (360) 357-8783.

There were many more accomplishments in 2019, and with the exception of the successful audit, all of the items noted above were generated by customer feedback and participation. The URAC is a great example of how customers can participate in transforming the PUD. We are still accepting applications to serve on the URAC. Applications can be found online at www.ThurstonPUD.org and will be accepted through March 1.

We know that 2020 will be just as productive, and we are exploring more ways to include and engage each customer. I encourage you to review our website and learn more about projects we have planned over the next five years. All are excellent examples of a proactive and committed water utility. Happy New Year to you and your loved ones on behalf of all of Thurston PUD.