



Thurston PUD Newsletter

We are committed to providing safe, reliable, affordable, and sustainable water services to our customers.

May 2022

Commissioner Message

Finding the Silver Lining in a Broadband Assessment

By: Russell E. Olsen, Thurston PUD Commissioner, District 2

Amid the pandemic in 2021, the Thurston PUD Board of Commissioners had a vision to help Thurston County citizens overcome the obstacles faced with access to high-speed internet. Hearing the outpour of frustration from residents throughout the county, especially in rural communities, I felt compelled to work with my fellow Commissioners to launch an analysis to better understand the issue of access to broadband and see if there was a way for the PUD to help mitigate the problem.



Russell E. Olsen,
Commissioner - District 2

In 2014 and 2015, the PUD partnered with the cities of Lacey, Olympia, and Tumwater to conduct a feasibility study that would explore shovel-ready broadband infrastructure projects in each municipality. Unfortunately, those projects would be abandoned for financial reasons, but the PUD never gave up on its position of the growing importance of high-speed internet to the County's economic prosperity, its impact on education, and the public's desire to have modern utilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the inequities to high-speed internet access throughout rural Thurston County. Communities in rural parts of the county have limited internet access which forced school children to do their schoolwork sitting in parked cars or on the steps of their shuttered schools to use the school's Wi-Fi. We heard from IT professionals at these schools who upgraded their Wi-Fi technology to extend signals past school walls to help these kids.

It was those types of stories that pushed the PUD Commissioners to act. In February of 2021, we authorized General Manager John Weidenfeller to launch a county-wide survey and conduct an assessment to understand the extent of the County's access to broadband. We provided John and his team two action steps to guide their outreach and assessment plans. The first action step was to coordinate with Thurston County schools with a special emphasis on rural school districts. The second action step was to coordinate with other entities including cities, towns, libraries, fire districts, local tribes, and small businesses. Ruth Clemens, the District's Administrative Services Manager was appointed as the Program Manager for this Broadband Assessment project.

Almost immediately, Ruth secured a grant through the Community Economic Revitalization Board to fund the outreach project. To conduct the survey and assessment, the PUD partnered with NoaNet, a public benefit wholesale

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Thurston PUD Commissioners

District 1

Linda Oosterman

District 2

Russell E. Olsen

District 3

Chris Stearns

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Finding the Silver Lining in a Broadband Assessment *(Continued from Page 1)*

telecommunications organization that helped us with this survey and assessment. The goal was to ask people, especially those without high-speed internet, to take the survey which launched in June 2021. Ruth and her team first met with leaders from all school districts to encourage families to let us know their experience with internet access. The team then opened up their efforts to build partnerships with and garner support from organizations like the Timberland Regional Library and local branches, Intercity Transit, local fire districts, the Thurston Regional Planning Council, the Thurston Economic Development Council, the Nisqually Tribe, the Chambers of Commerce, and the State Broadband Office, to name a few groups that helped spread the word about the survey. We were also invited to serve on the Thurston County Broadband Action Team, a committee of select governmental organizations and associations collaborating to expand broadband access throughout Thurston County. For nearly eight months, Ruth and her team conducted a robust outreach effort all through the County.



Last month, we received the completed assessment from NoaNet which had promising news for the residents of Thurston County. We learned there are many different broadband projects concurrently happening throughout the county like system upgrades for existing ISPs and the installation of new infrastructure from future providers. These projects are made possible through the availability of federal/state dollars used for broadband infrastructure.

From the assessment, we learned that cost, not infrastructure availability, was the greatest barrier for customers living in urban parts of the county. We also learned that most rural areas fell under existing private-sector service territories or have deployment efforts underway which means upgrades and more infrastructure is on the way.

Unfortunately for the PUD, opening a new line of utility business would be a significant financial investment that poses a cost barrier from which we would not be able to overcome. According to cost estimates, the PUD would stand to lose over \$1 million over a 12-year period by adding a telecommunications/broadband utility.

I believe that our time spent assessing the state of broadband access for the county was victory for the residents of Thurston County. Not only were we able to raise the awareness of many important leaders and organizations in the broadband field, we were also able to build and strengthen relationships with an assortment of leaders who play influential roles in the water industry. We made Thurston PUD a visible leader in the pursuit of intently mitigating a major issue and we helped push private ISPs to reexamine their current services and approaches. However, I believe our greatest accomplishment was giving a voice to Thurston County residents, schools, organizations, businesses, and associations that believe broadband is an essential utility.

I want to give special thanks to all those who participated in the survey and this effort. We appreciate your support.

ALERT: Material Shortages and Supply Chain Disruptions Cause Delays

The COVID-19 pandemic is still affecting many industries, especially utility and construction industries. Over the last two years, the PUD has experienced supply chain disruptions, unpredictable lead times, and unexpected price spikes for frequently-used materials and equipment. Here are some ways the PUD is being impacted and how we are making adjustments to the way we do business:

- A disruption in chlorine production at the factory-level has led to a shortage which is used to disinfect drinking water at some of our water systems. We have expanded our suppliers list to meet this need.
- Short and unavailable supplies have resulted in employees keeping a larger stock of pumps and other critical equipment on hand to ensure we are ready for an emergency repair or replacement.
- Although our employees are always looking for the cheapest gas, increasing fuel prices have further pushed our team to ensure they are getting the best price available through our network of vendors.

We are monitoring these situations closely, and appreciate your patience and understanding as we try our best to meet customer needs. If you have any questions about the PUD and our operations, please contact us at (360) 357-8783, toll-free at (866) 357-8783, or via email at PUDCustomerService@thurstonpud.org.

What's Happening at the PUD?

Thank a Water Utility Worker! Drinking Water Week - May 1 through May 7, 2022

For more than 40 years, the American Water Works Association (AWWA) and its members (including the PUD) have used Drinking Water Week as a unique opportunity to recognize the vital role water plays in the daily lives of both water professionals and the communities they serve.

Help us celebrate by learning more about your water supply by visiting www.thurstonpud.org or thanking a PUD employee! For more information on Drinking Water Week, please visit the AWWA website at www.awwa.org/events-education/drinking-water-week.

Office Closure & Reminders

Thurston PUD will be closed on Monday, May 30, 2022 for Memorial Day. If you experience a water service emergency, during business hours or otherwise, please call us at (360) 357-8783 or toll-free at (866) 357-8783 to connect with our team and on-call staff.

A reminder from our Field Operations Team: please keep vegetation (including trees, shrubbery, and grass) around your meter box pruned and trimmed so that our crew is able to safely access and read your water meter and the surrounding area. We appreciate your cooperation as we do our best to serve you!

Utility Rate Advisory Committee Vacant Positions

In 2018, the PUD Board of Commissioners created the Utility Rate Advisory Committee (URAC) to encourage citizen participation in the PUD budget process and to learn about PUD operations. The URAC, currently comprised of five PUD customers, meets several times throughout the year with PUD Board President Russell E. Olsen and PUD staff to discuss rates, policies, and many other topics related to the PUD.

The URAC has made several recommendations to the Board since 2018 which have positively influenced the way we do business. Here are some examples of changes we've made based on the URAC's recommendations:

- Fifth Consumption Tier
- Budget Billing
- Rate Rounding on Customer Bills
- Cubic Feet Conversion on Customer Bills

The URAC is currently recruiting! URAC meetings are usually held in the evenings on weekdays throughout the year. If you are interested in serving on the URAC, please email Administrative Services Manager Ruth Clemens at rclemens@thurstonpud.org or call (360) 515-6118 to have an application sent to you.

Employee Spotlight

This month, we would like to introduce Kalelia Gipson, a Customer Service Representative (CSR) at the PUD. Kalelia was hired as a temporary employee in 2021 before joining our team as a permanent employee in April. Kalelia enjoys spending time with her two sons, especially when basketball is involved!

As a CSR, Kalelia's chief responsibilities are answering customer inquiries, taking payments, and assisting customers with anything else they may need. Kalelia encourages customers to call whenever they need answers about their account! Please help us welcome Kalelia to the team by saying hello to her on your next call to the PUD.



Kalelia Gipson, CSR

2022 Conservation Programs

Each year, Thurston PUD promotes water conservation inside and outside your homes by offering tools, resources, and rebates. This year, the PUD is offering the following:

- **Residential Toilet Rebate.** A \$50.00 rebate is offered for qualifying high-efficiency residential toilet replacements. Toilet fixtures are required to be purchased in 2022 and must include the WaterSense logo (right). Please review all eligibility criteria by clicking on the “Residential Toilet Rebate” link at www.thurstonpud.org/water-systems.htm.
- **Smart Meter Program.** Smart, cellular meters are offered to customers that want direct access to their water consumption data. Customers are billed \$50.00 for the meter itself (valued at \$250), then an additional \$3.00 per month for the ongoing cost of the app. Customers will gain access to an online dashboard, accessible by computer or on a mobile device, to view consumption, leak alerts, or tips on conserving water.
- **Shower Timers and Garden Timers.** These devices are offered to help customers keep track of their water usage and conserve. Request forms for these devices can be found on the PUD’s website.



Check for the WaterSense logo before you buy.

For more information on the programs listed above or to apply for any of these programs, please visit the Conservation Programs section on the PUD’s website at www.thurstonpud.org/water-systems.htm.

If you’d like to request an application or request a form for any of the programs listed above, please contact our Customer Service Team at (360) 357-8783 or toll-free at (866) 357-8783. You can also send an email to PUDCustomerService@thurstonpud.org.

There are a limited number of rebates, smart meters, and water timers available, and these programs are offered on a first-come, first-served basis. Please contact us at your earliest convenience to take advantage of these programs!

Say No to Backflow

Plumbed irrigation systems. Hot tubs. Swimming pools. Fire sprinkler systems. These are a few examples of common cross connections that require backflow devices to prevent contamination of a public water system.



Two examples of an air gap.

A cross-connection is a physical connection between a drinking water pipe and any other non-potable substance. As an example, let’s say you use a hose to fill up a water trough for your farm animals, and you leave the hose submerged in the water as it fills. If you don’t have a backflow device connected to the hose bib and there is a water line break somewhere in your neighborhood, a backflow event can drain the water out of the trough and into the public water supply.

The simplest way to prevent backflow, like in the example above, is through an air gap, which is a physical space between the water outlets and pipe or end destination. For cross-connections that are a little more complex (like an irrigation system, pool, or hot tub) a cross-connection specialist can install one for you.

Thurston PUD is required to implement a Cross-Connection Control Program, but customers are responsible for backflow assembly installation, as well as initial and annual testing of these devices.

Over the next couple months, our team will be sending out Cross-Connection Control Surveys to customers. This survey will help us send out annual testing reminders and continuously educate our customers on how to protect their water source.