

DULUTH PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION
Meeting Minutes
October 17, 2017

Members Present: Councilor Noah Hobbs, Jen Julsrud, Chris McIntosh, Rob Prusak, Councilor Joel Sipress, Councilor Em Westerlund

Members Absent: Jason Thorsell

Staff Present: Bob Asleson, Jim Benning, Liz Bieter, Leanna Gilbert, Courtney Kile, Carrie Lustig, Zoe Respondek, Eric Shaffer, Glenn Strid, Erica Vatsaas, Kerry Venier

Call to Order: The meeting was called to order at 5:20 p.m. by President Prusak.

Approval of previous meeting minutes

New business:

Water rates

A list of considerations regarding water rates for resale to municipalities was provided to commissioners. Jim Benning said that the agreements with the municipalities state that they will receive the same rate adjustments as Duluth residents do unless preceded by a cost of service study. The last study was done in 2011. President Prusak said that he did not see a reason to do another study and does not want to pay for one either. The last study cost about \$35,000. There was further discussion about the laws governing resale to other municipalities and also about previous rate increases.

Resources for low-income customers

Courtney Kile talked about the home energy loan program and the proposed expansion to include loans for private water service and sewer lateral replacement. Erica Vatsaas mentioned lead service lines and replacing over-sized water meters. Zoe Respondek talked about targeting multi-family homes with a combination of grant money and low-interest loans for energy conservation improvements. There was further discussion about incentives for property owners and tenants to conserve resources, whether the interest rate for home energy loans should be adjusted, and various other topics. Staff will look into lowering the interest rate and other options for recouping administrative costs as requested by commissioners.

WLSSD I&I ordinance

Jim Benning reported that we already have the pieces ready to comply with the approved WLSSD I&I ordinance, we just need to put them back into play. The sump pump program is ongoing. The Commission will need to approve the dollar amount for grants for lateral line replacements and also the number of laterals to be replaced per year. We previously offered \$4,000 for mandatory lateral replacements and \$3,000 for voluntary replacements. Staff would like to focus on Lakeside and Park Point, since these are problem areas for inflow and infiltration. There was some discussion about funding and the sunset of the clean water surcharge. Staff will come up with a proposal to present to the Commission for their review and approval.

Updates from staff

Jim Benning stated that the 2018 budget letter from WLSSD showed an increase of about 3%. This will result in an automatic sewer rate adjustment. We would like to discuss gas transport rates in the near

future. There are currently no customers on this rate class. Carrie Lustig explained the reasoning for the rate. The current rate is \$0.149 per CCF after the first year, and the first year is \$0.1661. The proposed new rate is \$0.179 after the first year, and \$0.196 the first year. Staff will put together a rate resolution and arrange for a public hearing during the November meeting.

Eric Shaffer talked about the I&I issues on Park Point and lateral lining projects. He also mentioned the overflows in August and the resulting smoke testing project in Lakeside.

Upcoming Council actions

Jim Benning mentioned a resolution for a new asset management agreement with United Energy Trading. The contract provides for an 80%/20% split with a guaranteed \$150,000 minimum for proceeds from the sale of our excess capacity in the gas pipeline. It is a 1-year contract with the option for 4 renewals.

Commissioner questions or comments

Commissioner Sipress relayed a question from a resident about Comfort Systems policies regarding the return of customer security deposits. Current policy requires on-time payments for 12 consecutive months before a deposit can be returned. Some low-income customers have a hard time making on-time payments in the winter months. Would it be possible to have a policy that as long as a customer is up to date on their payments at the end of 12 months they could get their deposit back? Liz Bieter explained that the 12 consecutive on-time payments establish credit and assure final payment. Customers who provide a reference from another utility company can have the deposit waived. Another option available is budget billing, which evens out payments throughout the year. Deposits are also not required if payments are made by a third-party vendor. Deposit amounts are determined by consumption, not income or location.

Commissioner Westerlund thanked Vice President Julsrud for all of the work she did on public education during the water rate increase process. She thanked President Prusak for showing up at the Council meeting to address the water rate increase veto resolution. She also thanked Eric Shaffer for his attention to the sewage concerns on Park Point.

Vice President Julsrud suggested a PowerPoint or video this winter to show commissioners what is currently going on with the storm sewer system. She also suggested another stormwater system tour this spring and possibly bringing the media along on a tour. Eric Shaffer stated that a lot of people are interested in stormwater treatment, but nobody can see the buried tanks that have already been installed.

Preview of upcoming business

The next regular meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, November 21, 2017, at 5:15 p.m. in City Council Chambers. The Commission will hold a public hearing and consider a resolution for the gas transport rate. They will continue to discuss the home energy loan interest rate. Staff will work on the WLSSD changes for January. A stormwater discussion and tour will be held next year.

Known absences for future meetings

No absences were mentioned. Jim Benning will find out when Jim Lewis will return to the Commission.

Adjournment: The meeting was adjourned at 6:56 p.m.