



Environmental Services Commission Notes

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Center for Urban Waters – 325 E D St
Zoom Meeting

March 13, 2025

Chair Sutter called the meeting to order at 4:12 p.m.

Commission Members Present: Bruce Martin, Chad Shutter, Mindi Kellar (arrived at 4:15 p.m.), Matthew Benedict, and Karen DiNicola

Commission Members Absent: Jonathon Paul, Mike Yaden, David Dailey, Jeff Paradise, Marty Campbell, and *Esther Beaumier

Chair Sutter welcomed everyone to the meeting, stating a quorum was not present and they would hold informal discussion. He then asked for self-introductions.

Vice Chair Kellar arrived here, at 4:15 p.m.

Informal discussion ensued regarding the following:

Public Comment

The public comment period is reserved for items on the current agenda only. Comments will be limited to the amount of time announced by the chair, presiding officer, or staff liaison, no more than five minutes per person per meeting.

No Public Comment was received.

Approval of meeting minutes of January 9 and February 13, 2025

This item was postponed to the next meeting.

2024 Year-End Financial Update

Mark Westland, Rates and Budget Team, provided an update on Environmental Services' 2024 year-end financials for all three utilities. He stated revenues were generally above plan due to investment earnings overperforming plan. He reviewed the 2025 financial forecast and the six-year revenue plan. He noted the plan is to slowly decrease rate increases over the next two biennium, but future regulation could impact the increases. He concluded by discussing planning beyond 2025, including monitoring operating cost increases, capital cost increases, and City Council priorities.

Discussion ensued regarding:

1. Commissioner Benedict asked which capital projects were delayed.
 - a. Staff stated both the Leach Creek and Puyallup Ave projects were pushed out.
2. Commissioner Martin asked why stormwater revenues were up 30%, what the interest is from, and if the Stormwater Fund was closer to plan in prior years.

- a. Staff stated the City received some one-time dollars from a legal settlement (approximately \$5M) and unplanned grant revenues. The interest was from 2022 Bond dollars sitting due to capital project delays.
3. Commissioner DiNicola asked what two major contracts were renegotiated, and Chair Sutter asked how long they were renewed for.
 - a. Staff clarified the contracts were not “renegotiated” but rather updated. The Western Slopes Wastewater Contract was updated to correct a billing error and to more accurately reflect the cost of service. The Solid Waste Disposal Contract had an annual CPI adjustment. Staff offered to provide the Commission with a brief update on all interlocal agreements at the next meeting.
4. Chair Sutter inquired what is done with the savings.
 - a. Staff stated the money stays in the funds and is factored into the rate model.
5. Commissioner DiNicola asked about the long-term asset management plan and how funding is accrued.
 - a. Staff stated there is a long-term asset management plan the Budget Team monitors. Then stated that historically funds were not accrued. However, because there is a large number of assets approaching their end, the conversation needs to start on how best to make up the upcoming gap.
6. Commissioner Martin stated if an accrual account is developed, how can we know how those dollars will be used?
 - a. Staff stated utility funds are enterprise funds and can only be used by the utility and cannot be used to support the General Fund per state law.

ES Communication Strategy and EnviroTalk Update

Leah Michaelson, Communication & Engagement Team, began by defining of what “communication” and “engagement” are, noting one is about sending messages and the other is about building relationships and getting feedback. She then reviewed a list of services the team can provide, the team's goals, and examples of some projects they are assisting with. She concluded by stating the overarching goals of the team are to ensure alignment and consistency, foster proactive communication, build trust and engagement, and improves internal communication.

Discussion followed regarding:

1. Commissioner Martin commented that in the past TAGRO was the only thing the general public knew about the City of Tacoma’s Environmental Services (ES) Department
 - a. Kurt Fremont, Interim Assistant Director, commented that the Communication & Engagement Team is there to increase community awareness, people often forget the services ES provide.
2. Commissioner DiNicola stated she was surprised that one of the goals of the Communications Team was not behavior change.
 - a. Staff stated changing behavior is hard and the department has invested resources to work on the change. Change cannot occur without communication and as a department they must establish trust with the community and communicate better about programs and services in the city. The Communications team is working hard to earn trust in the community and help them to understand who they are and what they do.
3. Commissioner DiNicola also expressed concerns that the “Beyond the Bin” event and the lack of communication about it. She also requested staff think about the data collected from the event.
 - a. Staff stated the event will be held on the second Saturday in May.

4. Commissioner Martin stated the postcards for street sweeping are sent out too far in advance and people forget about the date.
5. Commissioner DiNicola asked why the City came up with a different campaign instead of leaning into the regional “Puget Sound Starts Here” campaign.
 - a. Staff stated that their team had active conversations on how to tie the “If It Hits the Ground, It Hits the Sound” campaign to other programs. Expressing they can do a better job at partnering regionally and looking at the bigger picture.
 - b. Staff noted the two programs are an “AND” and not an “OR”, and the main goal is to educate the public that stormwater is not treated and ES is not TPU.
 - i. Commissioner Martin concurred that there needs to be an effort to help the community understand that ES is not TPU, especially when it comes to their billing statement.
6. Commissioner DiNicola added it’s less important to know who picks up solid waste and the bigger problem is that schools have a different solid waste program.

Ms. Michaelson provided an update on the EnviroTalk newsletter, noting it is undergoing a makeover and the new look will launch in mid-April. She shared that the cost for printing and postage is approximately \$100,000 per year.

Discussion ensued regarding the following:

1. Commissioner Martin asked if an outside party could be used.
 - a. Staff stated the content is created by the Communications team. They are considering cutting the size of the publication in half, which would cut the cost in half. Staff is also looking into an Opt-out option and making a digital version available.
2. Commissioner DiNicola stated she talked to a few of her neighbors about the EnviroTalk and they didn’t feel like they were the target audience and were confused as to what the City really wants customers to know.
 - a. Staff stated that the Communication team ditched the recipe inside the publication and are trying to get a better understanding how customers want to be communicated to and what communication they want.
3. Commissioner Martin suggested making better use of what is communicated by including only the items customers need to know, including opportunities to participate, what can be put in containers, and rules. Commissioner DiNicola added that there is no such thing as a “flushable wipe” and the general public does not know this.

Mr. Fremont stated the communication plan is a marathon and the primary goal is to educate the community on our services.

Staff Reports

ES Director Hiring Update

Mr. Fremont stated the hiring process is ongoing and currently the first round of interviews is planned in early April. He confirmed that they are going to be able to have a commissioner on the panel. Looking at having a new directory by June/July possibly.

Fats, Oils, & Grease (FOG) Educational Flyer Update

John Sunich, Environmental Compliance, provided a copy of the flyer being sent to businesses and real estate agents explaining the FOG program. Communications team did a wonderful job on the flyer and presented the information in a easy to understand document.

Discussion followed regarding the following:

- a. Chair Sutter stated he has received feedback from some restaurants in the city. They state that other municipalities have several options and Tacoma seems to only have two. Are there other options available?
- b. Staff stated they are still collecting data for council maps and potential pitfalls. Planning & Development Services is working to compile up to date data of costs for installation and cost of use.
- c. Chair Sutter stated that we want people to realize the city is not against businesses.
- d. Commissioner DiNicola commented on the flyer and how well they did capture the things they talked about as a commission. Good job!

Upcoming Meetings

Mr. Fremont stated he would work with the Chair and Vice Chair to review topics and plan agendas as far in advance as possible.

Commissioner Other Items of Interest

Discussion followed regarding the following topics:

1. Comprehensive Plan
 - a. Commission DiNicola asked if the comprehensive plan could be sent out to everyone. She would like to have staff talk about six- and twenty-year comprehensive plan for the city and the utilities. She asked how many tasks are assigned to ES and how each department will accomplish goals.
 - b. Cristina Curran responded that it is not the role of our department to provide the comprehensive plan. Long term asset management planning with the focus on greenhouse emissions. We have a large fleet climate/data. The comprehensive plan is owned by the planning commission, and we are trying to be respectful of their lane.
 - c. Commissioner DiNicola mentioned the public presentation had zero depth. Regarding green gas, why ES?
 - d. Chair Shutter asked for suggestions on ways to get involved?
 - e. Cristina Curran suggested getting involved as a member of the community and feedback should go to the planning committee.
 - f. Kurt Freemont stated that ES has no control over public process.
 - g. Commissioner Martin asked why ES is not in the comprehensive plan?
 - h. Cassandra Moore stated that the comprehensive plan is very broad as it covers ten years.
 - i. Commissioner DiNicola stated that the plan went into great detail about what ES will be doing about trees.
 - j. Cristina Curran stated that the plan shows how our work is represented in ES and what we are doing withing the department to support the plan.
 - k. Chair Sutter suggested we make this a topic for further discussion.
2. Community Centers and Schools
 - a. Commissioner Benedict asked for clarification on how community centers and schools are collecting waste. Asked if we could make this a future topic.
3. Legal settlement from previous discussion
 - a. Chair Sutter referenced back to earlier discussion regarding the legal settlement and asked who the legal settlement was with as well as what lawsuits.

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- b. Cristina Curran stated that the settlement was in our favor and due to capital projects and utilities and things that don't work. There were projects completed and things went wrong. In the process it was discovered that the city was owed money for work that wasn't complete or went wrong.
- 4. Next meeting
 - a. Commissioner DiNicola asked if we could discuss changes to the stormwater mailer at our next meeting.
 - b.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 6:00p.m.