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Committee of the Whole

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Agency: [Cleveland City Council](#)

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Summary

- There are many job openings and apprenticeship opportunities with the Public Utilities department.
- There seems to be a sense of pride among department officials when presenting their responsibilities and details on their services.

Follow-Up Questions

- How can better outreach happen to let people know about available utilities discounts?
- How can the public learn about opportunities in the trades that lead to good-paying jobs?
- How can there be more understanding of the responsibilities for water bills for landlords versus tenants?

Notes

From [Documenters.org](#): “Like last year, council is getting a head start on next February’s budget hearings by conducting operational reviews of some city departments and their divisions to learn about their staffing levels, 2024 achievements, challenges and more.”

“Cleveland City Council’s Committee of the Whole gives all 17 council members the chance to meet and act as a committee. Essentially, it serves as an extra step in the process of discussing topics or vetting legislation before the City Council officially votes on legislation.”

Although this was offered as a Committee of the Whole, only members of the [Utilities Committee](#) attended, who are noted with an asterisk in the list below of current council

members:

- Joe Jones
- * Kevin Bishop
- Kerry McCormack
- * Deborah Gray
- Richard Starr
- Blaine Griffin, council president
- Stephanie Howse-Jones
- * Michael Polensek
- Kevin Conwell
- Anthony Hairston
- * Danny Kelly
- Rebecca Maurer
- * Kris Harsh
- Jasmin Santana
- * Jenny Spencer
- * Brian Kazy
- Charles Slife

This meeting immediately followed a committee session to advance [emergency ordinances](#) regarding utilities. The [livestream](#) for the operational review begins at the 20:38 mark of the video. A [Committee Calendar](#) was provided as the agenda, including an attachment of the Public Notice. This meeting focused on the following divisions in the [Department of Public Utilities](#): Cleveland Public Power (CPP), Water Pollution Control (WPC) and the Cleveland Division of Water (CDW).

The meeting was held in the Mercedes Cotner Room at Cleveland City Hall. Council members have a nameplate in front of them and sit at a long table in front of the room, facing the audience. Guests — typically administration officials — sit on the other side of the table and have their backs to the audience. There are approximately 30 available seats for the public, with comfortably padded chairs. Each speaker has a tabletop microphone in front of them and the sound is clear except for times when someone moves their mouth further away from the mics. There are screens on both the left and right of the table to show slide presentations about the information being discussed. Many of them had small print that was difficult to see, but Legislative Committee Clerk Inés Jiménez emailed them to me later when I asked if they were available. Those files are included in the notes below for reference.

Martin Keane, director of the Department of Public Utilities, served as the spokesperson and introduced the following staff:

- Danielle Graham, executive commissioner, Public Utilities
- Catherine Troy, CFO, Public Utilities
- Margreat Jackson, chief of public affairs, Public Utilities
- Ammon Danielson, commissioner of Cleveland Public Power
- Ryan Lopez, interim commissioner of Cleveland Water Pollution Control
- Laquita Johnson, chief of customer account services, Cleveland Water
- Alex Margevicius, commissioner of Cleveland Water

Keane acknowledged the hard work of the various divisions and said, “In everything that we do, we try to put the customer first.” He said that presentations would be given for the three divisions in the department. He referenced Brad Handke, the manager of the Office of Radio Communications, but he was not present at the meeting. This office supports and maintains the 800 megahertz radio system for Public Utilities as well as for Public Works and Public Safety. The office has increased from two employees to six.

Council Member Polensek asked about the possibility of using federal funds that are available through the U.S. Treasury Department to help consumers with bills, saying that he saw an expert on a panel who said that \$600 million has been set aside. Keane said it may be part of the [Low Income Housing Water Assistance Program](#) and that Public Utilities continues to join local and national campaigns to gain funding. Polensek agreed to share his notes from the panel.

[Cleveland Public Power](#)

Danielson and Troy gave details during the [slide presentation](#). Some key points:

- About 73,000 customers, hoping to get more, all of Cleveland preferably (distribution system currently covers $\frac{2}{3}$ of the city)
- 51% of employees are Cleveland residents
- Does not share infrastructure/equipment with competitors
- 33 essential substations (from the presentation: “substations step down the voltage in the transmission lines to voltage that is suitable for the distribution system”)
- 90% of minor outages are repaired within 2 hours
- 87% of major outages are repaired within 8 hours
- Intern to Apprentice program for high schoolers established in 2006
- Utility amnesty/assistance program helped 4,442 rate payers (for both CPP and

CWD accounts) using \$2 million from Cleveland's [American Rescue Plan Act](#) funds

Committee Chair Kazy's questions/comments:

- Gave kudos for positive bond ratings and diverse workforce
- Said the "amnesty program was absolutely wonderful"
- Asked about the gap in service areas on the map on slide 6; Danielson said due to limitations of existing grid
- Asked if internship program is through CMSD only; Danielson said other local high schools are included
- Asked about pay for apprentices after completing program; Danielson said some can make about \$45 per hour

Council Member Spencer's questions/comments:

- Thanked Danielson for coming to Ward 15 on Tuesday evening for residents' concerns about more lighting for safety
- Asked for more historical data on how it has been going with the apprentices each year
- Asked for materials/graphics that can be shared for recruitment for high schools for apprentice program
- 181 operations employees currently, asked what's optimal; Keane said 210 is optimal
- Asked if certain schools have shown the best procedures for recruitment; Danielson said not specifically, but they are in touch with 50+ employees at various schools
- Requested relationship with manager of call center with Utilities Committee; Kazy and Keane agreed, will look at January meetup

Polensek's questions/comments:

- Expressed frustration with CMSD, saying the school district has "frowned upon" working with your hands and turned their back on vocational programs
- Would like a brochure to help promote the apprenticeship program since he is at schools already
- For the apprenticeship program, "Can we bring in other age levels?" Keane said they negotiate the programs with all the unions, so union and state of Ohio approvals are needed, and they haven't gotten to the point where an older candidate is approved (such as a 28-year-old)
- Asked about salary immediately after apprenticeship completion; Danielson said

75% to 85% of the salary for journey workers (someone who has completed the apprenticeship)

- Said Kazy has constantly advocated for new businesses to use CPP, which helps with rates for residential users.
- Asked if FirstEnergy is “actively competing against us for customers in the city?” Keane said yes and they are actively seeking to get large customers on board.
- Expressed appreciation for their help, especially during storm situations.
- Would like tree trimming to be addressed during budget hearings

Council Member Harsh’s questions/comments:

- Asked how many people in apprenticeship program; Troy said average is 10 to 12 per year enroll and about 75% make it through all four years
- Said “We might have to rethink the way we try to attract kids into the trades” and direct recruitment by reaching out to schools to identify students may be helpful as “the ability to learn is a tremendous skill that will serve you well” and “availability is the best ability”
- Asked if apprenticeship program can address entire needs of department to fill positions; Keane said not likely – some do not complete the program or go to different roles
- Asked about the amnesty program; Keane confirmed that it was through ARPA funds, but there is an ongoing income-based assistance program and there are ongoing discussions to continue to look for options

Council Member Kelly and Danielson’s conversation:

- Kelly said “you have a great apprenticeship program”
- Danielson: Process starts with about 50 to 100 applicants per year with top 15 to 20 being interviewed to make the final selection of the 10 or so apprentices
- Danielson: Line worker is encouraged due to high demand, but beginning with internship they do see the different disciplines that are available
- Danielson: Still male-dominated participation, one female completed the program last spring and is doing well as a line worker, second female is a junior transmission operator, which is “another union position that’s very highly paid, highly skilled”

Kazy said, “Cleveland Public Power gets a bad rap, a non-deserving bad rap from certain entities in this city.” He said he is looking forward to the good things to come in 2025 as council has given all of the tools needed for “one of the best assets this city has.”

Water Pollution Control

Keane introduced Interim Commissioner Ryan Lopez, who gave details along with Troy while going through the [slide presentation](#). Key points:

- Responsible for managing sanitary, sewage and stormwater collection systems within the City of Cleveland. Lopez said, “I like to call ourselves the Uber of the stormwater and wastewater system.”
- 1,444 miles of sewer lines
- 11 pump stations
- 43,500-plus catch basins
- 283,000 home connections/lateral sewers
- 118,096 accounts with 8,760 on discount program
- Created graphic to show responsibility of city vs. homeowner (slide 8 in presentation)
- 59% of employees are Cleveland residents
- 10 student assistants have completed the 24-month apprenticeship program since its inception in 2018

Lopez said he was an entry-level sewer service worker 16 years ago who has worked his way up. “So I understand the significance and the importance of what we do,” he said, adding that “Customer service will be exemplary for WPC”. Kazy’s comments/questions:

- WPC is “definitely one of the quickest-responding departments in Cleveland.”
- Keane said they will get requested information to Kazy regarding how many times WPC has gone to residential homes about backup situations, and of that number, which were on the homeowner’s responsibility vs. the city’s.

Spencer’s comments/questions:

- Participated in virtual public meeting earlier this week, called it “fantastic” and gave [website information](#)
- Asked about residents reporting clogged catch basins; Keane said not in the 311 system yet, usually will go to Division of Streets, then eventually to them, but can always report through customer service
- Keane: WPC charges are listed on the Cleveland Water bill that customers receive

Polensek’s conversations with Lopez, Keane and Troy:

- Polensek said he hopes Lopez will be selected for the permanent position after

interim, as his personal experience is valuable

- Polensek's comment on WPC headquarters being in the garden spot in Ward 8 drew friendly laughter from several people at the table and in the audience
- Polensek wants WPC to be "in the pipeline" for any congressional funds - none available currently but the city does have connections with our reps
- Lopez: Pay scale for apprenticeships starts at \$15.63 per hour, ends at \$23.03
- Lopez: PVC pipes had been tried in past but were not using the proper grade, which could cause damage; now clay pipes are required from the treelawn to the main
- No specific areas getting an increased amount of flooding, acknowledged there were problems in the past
- Lopez: Actively trying to fill positions, currently have about six openings for sewer service workers
- WPC does not do training for heavy equipment operators, hires through [Local 18](#)

Harsh's conversations with Lopez and Keane:

- Manhole covers infrequently get stolen now as scrap yards are required to report them and police are involved if a person brings one in
- Keane: Different types of materials for manhole covers depending on location
- May be difficult to find out responsibilities for catch basin repairs, CityWorks shows the status and is accessible to all departments including Streets; Keane: If WPC gets a call, it fixes it
- A specific site in Harsh's ward still has an orange barrel after a couple of years, having difficulty determining responsibility for repairs, gave the location to Keane

[Cleveland Division of Water](#)

Commissioner Alex Margevicius came to the table and gave details from the [slide presentation](#) along with Troy. Key points:

- Mission is to deliver safe drinking water
- Take water in, make it potable, distribute it, make upgrades and improvements to the system, and respond to customer inquiries
- Serves Cleveland and 69 suburbs in six counties = 1.4 million customers
- 10th largest water system in the United States
- Four water treatment plants
- 17 pump stations
- 21 tanks and towers
- 5,300 miles of underground water main pipes

- In 2023, sold 39 billion gallons of water
- 96% of bills are based on actual meter reads, not estimates
- City of Cleveland has 118,546 accounts with 8,760 on the discount program
- Utility amnesty/assistance program helped 4,442 rate payers (for both CPP and WPD accounts) using \$2 million from [ARPA](#) funds
- 46% of employees are Cleveland residents
- 39 students have completed the 12-month apprenticeship since its inception in 2018, having received on-the-job training, classroom training and mentorship
- Apprentices become a water pipe repair worker, make \$20.85 per hour at the start, with a step schedule, making \$26.16 per hour in five years
- Customer account service staff has 300 employees
- Plant operation staff has 189 employees, someone covering 24 hours, 7 days a week
- Zero Ohio EPA treatment violations since about 2009
- Charter member for well over 20 years with the voluntary [Partnership for Safe Water](#)

Kazy's conversation with Troy:

- Some water account holders do not have WPC accounts due to irrigation (sprinklers), fire suppression systems
- Homestead discount program -- for people over 65 years and less than \$40,000 annual income, sign up with the call center, applicable for three years
- Affordability exemption is a federal program, income eligibility of 200% of the poverty level, administered by [CHN](#)

Spencer's conversation with Keane:

- Council needs to be on message regarding the safety of our drinking water
- Letters have gone out to homeowners who may have lead pipes, received one at her home, said it was very informative
- City does have funding through the [bipartisan infrastructure law](#) for the next three years to replace lead pipes and will be submitting the application soon for the next round
- It is federal law, presuming it will still be in force after the change in the presidential administration
- Funding comes in as a grant, with 49% forgivable

Polensek's conversations with Margevicius, Troy, Keane and Kazy:

- Master meter accounts allow provision of our clean water to suburbs and they do all servicing and support and EPA reporting from that point
- Fees for master meter accounts are determined through a cost-of-service analysis or rates legislation
- Polensek had concerns about the outstanding debt, and Troy said it falls well within best practice that the total debt be no more than three times the annual revenue, with a significant drop in the amount the past few years
- Polensek urges his constituents to be mindful of delinquent bills and to set up payment plans to avoid shutoffs

Harsh began a discussion regarding discounts for customers that ended up including quite a few members and lasted approximately 20 minutes. Key points:

- Need to count how many accounts are eligible for discounts vs. how many actually applied and/or receive the discount
- Tenants are not eligible for the discount, only homeowners
- Some landlords are pushing the water bill onto tenants
- Increasing numbers of landlords are out of state and even outside the United States
- Margevicius said federal lawsuit years ago was set up to protect tenants but has been turned out to be more protective of landlords
- Keane referenced [Ohio House Bill 93](#) and said the landlords are controlling the Statehouse
- Council would like to revisit issue, see how tenants can be more protected and eligible for a discount

Harsh also asked about the proposed dome stadium for the Cleveland Browns in Brook Park. Keane agreed that there will be sewer upgrades needed in the area for the 60,000 people that would be using the facility. He agreed that it is a high likelihood that it is something that the Public Utilities will have to address, but they have not been approached about this issue.

Kazy closed the meeting by saying that utilities-related legislation is done for this year, and that they would like to set up a tour for the call center. He adjourned the meeting at 12:28 p.m.

If you believe anything in these notes is inaccurate, please email us at cleddocumenters@gmail.com with "Correction Request" in the subject line.