



OREGON WATER UTILITY COUNCIL



(Submitted electronically on March 24, 2020 to Members of the Joint Special Committee on Coronavirus Response)

The League of Oregon Cities, Special Districts Association of Oregon, Oregon Association of Water Utilities, Oregon Water Utility Council, Association of Clean Water Agencies and the Oregon Water/Wastewater Agency Response Network appreciate the opportunity to submit the following comments on behalf of publicly owned drinking water and wastewater providers across the state of Oregon. We ask that the committee consider inclusion of public drinking water, wastewater (sewer) and stormwater services in the context of discussions around potential state-assistance to help in our efforts to provide utility rate relief. In addition, we serve to be a resource to the committee during this time.

In accordance with recommendations from the American Water Works Association, drinking water and wastewater providers across the state are working tirelessly to maintain critical services and to provide flexibility to ratepayers due to the economic hardship that is impacting so many Oregonians. Prior to this public health emergency, many of our members had already established financial assistance programs to benefit seniors and low-income households and individuals. In response to the spread of COVID-19 and the resulting loss of jobs for many Oregonians, our members are stepping up to offer additional assistance to ratepayers during this time. That includes ceasing drinking water service shut off for non-payment or past due bill collection during this period of economic hardship.

It is important to note, however, that there are economic realities that can have significant long-term impacts on our ratepayers. As we strive to provide flexibility to those experiencing financial hardship during this time, there will be impacts to utilities both in the short-term and long-term.

A letter that was submitted to congressional leadership on March 23 from national water utility associations, including the American Public Works Association, Water Environment Federation and the National Association of Clean Water Agencies, stated the following:

“... the economic impacts of coronavirus are expected to be enormous. Decreased revenue from households less able to pay their bills and the sudden drop-off in industrial and business water usage could lead to billions of dollars in lost revenue for water and wastewater systems nationwide. This, coupled with additional costs water systems will incur for ongoing emergency operations during the course of the pandemic, will represent a significant sum that will be passed on to local customers through higher water rates.”

In addition, we are witnessing increased costs associated with the implementation of continuity of operations plans for water and wastewater utilities. These plans ensure that critical infrastructure providers are able to continue working during this time to deliver services that Oregonians rely on. Utilities are working to stagger teams of employees to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spread among critical staff and are prioritizing workloads to ensure that protection of public health through the delivery of safe drinking water and the treatment of wastewater are of the highest priority. We are hearing from utilities across the state that are adjusting operations to adhere to social distancing guidelines. The health and safety of infrastructure service providers is a significant priority as critical services can't be provided without healthy personnel.

We ask that the committee consider the following:

- Inclusion of drinking water, wastewater and stormwater rate relief for public utility providers, including local government providers. It is important to note that city, county and special district water/wastewater providers are *not* regulated by the Public Utility Commission as they are regulated by their elected councils, boards, commissions, etc.
- Assistance in spreading awareness over the challenges and public health threats associated with flushing non-flushable items down the toilet. Only toilet paper should be flushed down toilets. Due to shortages of toilet paper, local governments are urging the public to refrain from flushing other items including wipes that are labeled as “flushable.” Many local governments are seeing an increase in sewer clogs and materials being caught in the wastewater treatment process. This results in potential sewer backups which is of greater concern due to potential exposure to a variety of pathogens, including COVID-19 and due to utilities having a reduced number of employees to address those sewer clogs/backups during the Governor’s “stay at home” Executive Order #20-12.
- We are currently exploring areas where state regulatory relief may be needed. Regulations that are in place to ensure health and safety should not be lifted, but there may be other regulations, timelines, deadlines, etc. that will detract from our ability to prioritize workloads and critical services during this time. We will reach out to the committee with specific requests as they are identified.
- Finally, we ask the Joint Special Committee on Coronavirus Response use the below listed associations and contacts as a resource should there be questions, concerns or correspondence we can get out to our memberships. Our combined memberships cover all publicly owned water and wastewater systems across the state. We appreciate the opportunity to be of assistance to the committee and hope that you will use us as a resource.

Contact information:

League of Oregon Cities, Tracy Rutten (lobbyist) – trutten@orcities.org

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Oregon Association of Water Utilities, Jason Green (Director) – jgreen@oawu.net

Oregon Association of Clean Water Agencies, Susie Smith (Executive Director) – smith@oracwa.org

Oregon Water Utility Council, Mike Grimm (Chair) – mgrimm@wswd.org

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