

City of San Antonio



Minutes Municipal Utilities Committee

2021 – 2023 Council Members
Dr. Adriana Rocha Garcia, Dist. 4, Chair
Teri Castillo, Dist. 5 | Melissa Cabello Havrda, Dist. 6
John Courage, Dist. 9 | Marc Whyte, Dist. 10

Tuesday, October 22, 2024

10:00 AM

City Hall Complex

The Municipal Utilities Committee convened a regular meeting in the Council Briefing Room in the City Hall Complex beginning at 10:00 AM. City Clerk Debbie Racca-Sittre took the Roll Call noting a quorum with the following Committee Members present:

Members Present: John Courage, *Member*
Melissa Cabello Havrda, *Member*
Teri Castillo, *Member*
Marc Whyte, *Member*
Dr. Adriana Rocha Garcia, *Chair*

Members Absent: None

Approval of Minutes

1. Approval of minutes from the September 24, 2024 Municipal Utilities Committee Meeting

Councilmember Courage moved to Approve the minutes of the September 4, 2024 Municipal Utilities Committee meeting. Councilmember Cabello Havrda seconded the motion. The motion carried by the following vote:

Aye: Courage, Cabello Havrda, Rocha Garcia, Castillo

Absent: Whyte

Briefing and Possible Action on

2. Briefing by the San Antonio Water System on the Culmination of the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Consent Decree. [Ben Gorzell Jr., Chief Financial Officer; Troy Elliott, Deputy Chief Financial Officer]

Annette Duron, SAWS Director of Operations Support provided an overview of the sewer collection system which included more than 6,000 miles of main and was growing by

approximately 100 miles/year. She stated that the system also included over 150 lift stations, three water recycling centers, and daily flow and respective peak flows in the following waterways: Medio Creek (16 million gallons per day (mgd)/40 mgd), Leon Creek (46 mgd/92 mgd), and Steven M. Clouse Water Recycling Center (125 mgd/250 mgd).

Duron reported that in May 2007, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region 6 contacted SAWS under a nationwide initiative and the EPA referred the case to the Department of Justice. She indicated that at that time (May 2008) Robert Puente was named Interim President and Chief Executive Officer and SAWS formed a negotiation team comprised of experts from: Treatment, Engineering, Distribution and Collections, Finance, and Legal. Duron noted that negotiations remained active in 2008 and early 2009 but stalled for two and a half years. She noted that SAWS began to assess, clean and replace sewer mains and update rates to pay for the Consent Decree improvements. Duron reported that negotiations resumed in late 2011 with the goals of: reducing sewer spills, providing long-term community benefit, maintaining affordability, tailoring for SAWS's unique system, allowing for SAWS's best judgment, and building internal expertise.

Duron stated that negotiations with the EPA were successful due to positive and professional dialogue with the EPA and the opportunity for SAWS to educate the EPA on SAWS unique opportunities and challenges. Duron reported that SAWS used industry experts to tailor their program, improve service to ratepayers and increase the value of public infrastructure. Despite additional costs, SAWS bills remained among the lowest in Texas, according to Duron.

The Consent Decree was approved by the SAWS Board on June 4, 2013 and went into effect on July 23, 2013, according to Duron. Duron provided an update on measures taken to meet the goals of the Consent Decree and stated that SAWS was dedicated to a continuation of best practices including monitoring the condition of and maintaining the sewer system. She noted that SAWS conducted a capacity analysis and had a plan for remediation while fully leveraging knowledge and experience gained. Duron mentioned that SAWS had an ongoing Project Controls Program and the staff/leadership of SAWS as well as the community partnership was key to the success of the Consent Decree.

DISCUSSION:

Chair Rocha Garcia commented that SAWS had gone above and beyond and was held as a national model. She noted that the W-6 Project was in Council District 4 on Military Drive and did not impact traffic due to underground tunnelling. Chair Rocha Garcia recognized that the Consent Decree would be completed in 2026 but recommended keeping up with quality infrastructure while keeping rates low.

Councilmember Cabello Havrda lauded SAWS for their proactiveness and becoming a model. She asked if there was a grace period for homeowners to fix sewage leaks on their properties and asked who was responsible for enforcement. Duron stated that TCEQ was responsible for compliance both for SAWS and private property owners; SAWS owned from the street to the sewer line, but property owners were responsible for laterals and any lines on their property, however, SAWS reported private sewer spills to Code Enforcement who monitored private property. Gavino Ramos, Vice President of Communications and External Affairs with SAWS, stated that the utility had a "Laterals to People" Assistance Program for homeowners who

qualified.

The City Attorney's Office explained that when a sewer leak was found on private property, Code Enforcement would investigate and give a 10-day notice to repair, and if not repaired in 10 days, Code Enforcement would begin the citation process.

Councilmember Courage thanked Puente for SAWS leadership and noted that they were able to meet the goals of the Consent Decree and still keep the rates low and commended SAWS for the "Grease Monster" Education Program.

Councilmember Castillo commended SAWS for working through the Consent Decree on a voluntary resolution and reducing sewer spills. She asked what barriers had been encountered to the success of the Program. Duron stated that time was added to large capital improvement projects due to the need for right-of-way through negotiation or eminent domain. Puente stated that the W-6 Project was unique because it crossed Lackland Air Force Base which was a challenge to get on base to do work which caused delays; it literally took an act of the U.S. Congress to make the W-6 Project happen.

Councilmember Castillo requested more information on the Laterals to People Program which was an issue requested through a Council Consideration Request (CCR) 2024-0009: Water and Sewer Lateral Improvements Program. She also asked SAWS to map homes within the City of San Antonio limits that did not have sewer connectivity. Puente stated that SAWS was working on an evaluation of the CCR scope and looking at best practices. Duron noted that sometimes residents were not connected directly to the sewer through their own lateral. Congressman Joaquin Castro was working to appropriate \$2 million at the State level for laterals, according to Puente.

Councilmember Whyte asked if there was a goal or metric for sewer spills by 2026. Duron stated that the ultimate goal was three or less sewer spills per 100 miles of system which they were currently meeting. Councilmember Whyte noted that over 52 miles of pipe had been identified for replacement or rehabilitation within the Consent Decree. Duron stated that the Consent Decree included the system areas in the worst condition, but any other issues were being handled timely.

Chair Rocha Garcia looked forward to the final resolution of the Consent Decree in 2026 and noted that the Item was for briefing only so no action was taken.

3. Briefing by SAWS on the electronic meter program, ConnectH2O. [Ben Gorzell Jr., Chief Financial Officer; Troy Elliott, Deputy Chief Financial Officer]

Cecilia Velasquez, Vice President for the SAWS Customer Experience & Strategic Initiatives, provided the key objectives for the ConnectH2O Program which were to enhance the customer experience by providing more water usage information, empower every customer to proactively manage their own water footprint, and improve efficiency by reducing costs and non-revenue water.

Velasquez stated that that the new ConnectH2O meter installations were performed through a combination of SAWS employees and their contractor, Olameter. She reported that SAWS

provided project management services such as: route deployment, warehousing and inventory management, pit cleaning, quality reviews, and call center support for scheduling and customer installation concerns.

Velasquez provided a timeline and updated on the deployment which was forecasted to complete installations by December 2025 and a total of 300,000 had already been installed. She indicated that customers were provided advanced notice on the SAWS website two weeks in advance and customers received a robo-call with installation information one week in advance. She added that on the day of installation, SAWS provided a door hanger with further instructions and one week after installation a new postcard focused on online portal engagement was sent.

Velasquez stated that initiatives to save water with ConnectH2O included more leak notifications, tools to assist post leak notification, and wrong day watering reminders. For example, continuous usage which might indicate a leak would result in customers receiving a robo-call, email, and text message with estimated gallons used, the continuous use duration, and an estimated leak rate, according to Velasquez. She noted that SAWS also performed phone consultations and at-home indoor consultations, and provided do-it-yourself leak detection, customer-plumber checklist, and the WaterSmart Leak Finder Tool. She stated that the Program was intended to help customers find out about a problem faster and help them save water and money.

Velasquez concluded her presentation by noting that national studies had indicated that 0.5%-0.9% of residential volume could be saved through the use of leak alerts; if all residents saved 0.5% that would be 200 million gallons or 614 acre feet per year at full deployment of the ConnectH2O System. Additionally, using the WaterSmart Platform Tool to identify irrigation cycles such as watering 3 or more days per week or using more than 400 gpd or 12,000 gallons per month had already resulted in a 51% change to once per week within two weeks and large reductions in use per account that corrected. She indicated that at full deployment, 240 million gallons per year could be saved or 737 acre feet per year through compliance with wrong-day irrigation.

DISCUSSION:

Chair Rocha Garcia was pleased that the new meters were being installed and most appreciated the alert for leaks so that people did not end up with thousands of dollars in water bills. She asked how this changed the annual meter reading. Velasquez stated that wastewater monitors were read during November through March and averaged to get the amount of sewer bills for the year; water meters were read monthly. Chair Rocha Garcia asked of the total cost of the Program Velasquez reported that the total cost of the Program was \$215 million with most of the cost being the meters themselves. Chair Rocha Garcia wanted to ensure there was a safeguard for residents that were not tech savvy through phone calls.

Councilmember Castillo supported the multiple points of contact including the phone calls (including robo-calls) and door hangers. Councilmember Castillo asked how much the contracted workers were being paid hourly for installation of the new meters. Velasquez stated that Olameter was SAWS' vendor to install the meters and had been reading meters since 2007, however, the new meters would not need workers to read them as they were monitored digitally. Councilmember Castillo wanted to ensure that the installers would still have work to do after the

installation was completed so she suggested they might need to be retrained. Councilmember Castillo wanted to ensure that the new water meters were not leaking. Velasquez stated that each customer's meter installation situation was unique, but meters were being monitored for leaks.

Councilmember Whyte appreciated that SAWS was working to keep customers informed about their water usage.

Councilmember Courage commented that the new meters installed by CPS Energy were much more precise which resulted in people using more electricity and asked if SAWS was finding that their new smart meters showed more water usage and requested a comparison a year from now. Velasquez stated that the meters could be 1-2% off depending on the size of the meter. Councilmember Courage asked if there was increased revenue to SAWS with the new meters. Doug Evanson, Executive Vice President and Chief Financial Officer, stated that they had not seen more revenues due to excellent compliance to water restrictions.

Councilmember Courage appreciated how the meter could provide daily information on usage to help homeowners manage their usage.

Chair Rocha Garcia thanked SAWS for their presentation and noted that the Item was for Briefing only so no action was taken.

Executive Session

No Executive Session was held.

Adjournment

There being no further discussion, the meeting was adjourned at 11:04 a.m.

Approved

Adriana Rocha Garcia, Chair

Debbie Racca-Sittre, City Clerk