

The Ripple Effect

1984 - 2014



Citizens Utility Board
30 Years and Counting
of Oregon

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CUB Pushes Change Through Portland Utility Oversight Commission

In July 2014, Janice Thompson, CUB's Consumer Advocate for residential customers of Portland's water, sewer, and stormwater management services, joined 11 other representatives in launching the Utility Oversight Blue Ribbon Commission, charged with making recommendations to the City Council for ways to strengthen oversight of Portland's public utilities. Since then, Janice has been pushing for change, and contributing in-depth analysis to the recommendations that were presented to the Council in mid-October in their preliminary form.

Janice developed a model for the Utility Oversight Commission to provide a visual goal for effective oversight. Figure 1 summarizes historical oversight problems. The decision-making body at the top is the Portland City Council, but they don't have a good track record for listening.

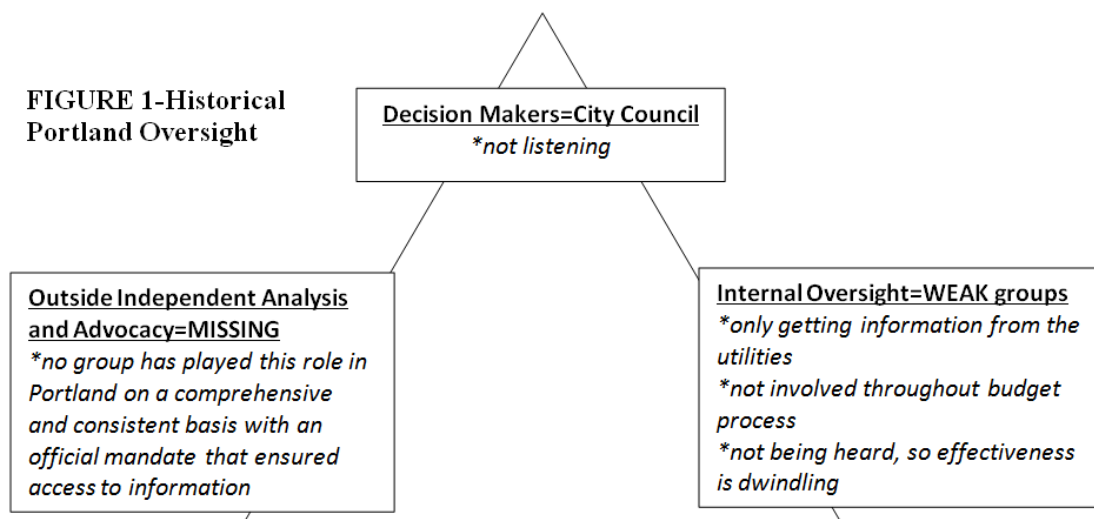
The right-hand corner of the triangle includes internal oversight groups, but they rely only on information from the public utility bureaus and are only consulted early in the budget process. Another historical gap has been the lack of a strong player in the lower left hand corner, providing comprehensive analysis and advocacy from outside City Hall.

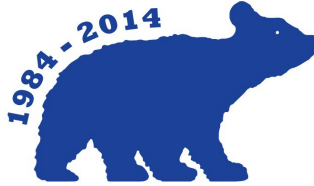
Comparing the triangle's three corners to the three legs of a stool offers a telling analogy: Portland utility oversight has been a stool with only 2 legs, and one of them is weak and ineffective.

CUB is now in the lower left hand corner providing independent analysis and advocacy. CUB has full access to Portland utilities' budget information, including details about construction projects, a major driver of rising costs. CUB's role gives the oversight stool the third leg it needs. But the internal oversight leg is still

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FIGURE 1-Historical Portland Oversight





Monthly Water & Sewer Billing for All!

Portland's residential customers typically get a quarterly bill for water, stormwater management, and sewer services based on meter readings done four times a year. This approach saves money for our public utilities, but it means a big bill for Portlanders to manage every three months.

But change is coming.

Portlanders have an option now to get monthly bills electronically. But there are still folks who don't have access to a computer or just like getting a paper bill. So CUB has been pushing for monthly utility bills for all residential customers. This option is within sight.

By the end of the year Portland residents should be able to request a monthly paper bill. Your meter will still be read four times a year, but that reading will trigger three monthly statements that split the cost of what has been a quarterly bill.

If paying quarterly has been okay with you, then don't request the new monthly option. Obviously this new option doesn't change the overall charges, so CUB is also on the lookout for ways to rein in rates.

CUB is carefully monitoring the expected end-of-2014 timeline. Since this transition involves some work that isn't completely under control of the City's customer service staff, though, there could be delays. By the time you're reading this, we could have already won this issue. Or we might still be pushing for this important change.

Go to CUB's website at www.oregoncub.org/portland for updates and hopefully you'll read a victory story. If not, you'll see an action alert to send a message to City Hall to make sure we achieve this win for ratepayers!

CUB Pushes Change *(continued from front page)*

too weak. That is where the Utility Oversight Blue Ribbon Commission comes in.

Figure 2 illustrates how the City Council's full implementation of Utility Oversight recommendations will result in all three corners of the effective utility oversight triangle being at full strength.

FIGURE 2 -Utility Oversight Commission Recommendations

Outside Independent Analysis and Advocacy=CUB

**Utility Oversight Commission sees CUB as playing a valuable role doing outside independent analysis*
**CUB will play a key role in holding City Council accountable in carrying out recommendations made by the Utility Oversight Commission*

City Council

**has to listen or provide rationale if recommendations of the new oversight group are not heeded*

Internal Independent Oversight and Advocacy=NEW OVERSIGHT GROUP

**replaces two currently ineffective oversight processes*
**independent of the utility bureaus*
**broad scope*
**integrated into City Council budget process*

The new internal oversight group is not just another layer of bureaucracy, since it replaces existing weak processes. The stronger oversight group would have a broad scope. The City Council must also adopt new procedures that fully integrate the new oversight group at every step of the budget and rate setting process.

CUB's continued role as an outside advocate doing independent analysis is also recommended by the Utility Oversight Blue Ribbon Commission. A top CUB priority is making sure the City Council fully implements these recommendations. Check out our website – www.oregoncub.org - for updates on the work of the Utility Oversight commission!