

Water department overhaul completed

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A team of consultants hired more than a year ago to overhaul operations in Cleveland's water department reports its work is finally complete and has yielded major improvements to customer service, collections and billing accuracy.

Among the turnaround project's most notable achievements is the dramatically reduced amount of time that callers must wait to speak with customer-service representatives, consultant Paul Bender told City Council members Wednesday at a Public Utilities Committee meeting.

Eighty percent of calls are answered in less than 30 seconds, with less than 5 percent of callers hanging up in frustration before they speak to a representative, Bender said. A year ago, callers waited an average of 16 minutes for assistance.

Billing operations have been streamlined, too, Bender said. The backlog of thousands of pending bills is on pace to be eliminated in the next three

months. The department has identified more than 13,000 accounts that never received consistent bills and traced thousands more to vacant lots and empty homes, he said.

Although Bender's report marks the official end of the turnaround project, he warned the council that the city must rely heavily on consultants and other contractors who are still monitoring operations to ensure the improvements are maintained.

"There is a significant amount of work to do on training, coaching and follow-up," Bender said of the water department staff, "because these are the folks that grew up with the old system, and the new system has different requirements and expectations. So the person who was in the call center two years ago is not exactly the person who needs to be there today."

City Councilman Jay Westbrook said he is anxious about consultants leaving the water department to manage itself, and he wondered aloud about hiring an outside source to oversee the

changes over the long term.

"We're not a good auditor," Westbrook said, referring to the council. "We're good at fanning flames when there's a fire, but we're not good at putting up the smoke detectors. I'd really hate to have a future city administration and council say ... 'They did all that stuff in 2011 and it's just typical reform — they regressed.'"

City Finance Director Sharon Dumas said the city has worked hard to recruit or promote the most effective managers to oversee the department's operations. She added that Mayor Frank Jackson himself will serve as the ultimate supervisor and has set his standards and expectations high.

Councilman Michael Polensek expressed concern about problems created by absentee landlords, who turn a profit on inner-city properties while stealing water by illegally turning on utilities that have been shut down for nonpayment.

Bender said the water department will be able to identify water thieves more easily once an

automatic meter-reading system is fully operational early next year.

The system will automatically report hourly water use — virtually ending the department's practice of estimating bills when faulty meters go undetected for an entire billing cycle. The technology will allow for more-accurate monthly, rather than quarterly, bills. And it will flag water-usage irregularities, including illegally activated utilities, Bender said.

So far, more than 5,000 out of 420,000 properties have received the equipment upgrades, which include low-frequency radio transmitters, called "endpoints," installed outside each house to harvest usage information.

Bender said the installation schedule is moving more slowly than anticipated — at about 100 a day — while technicians work out the "kinks." The system will be tested this fall with a review of all bills generated using the technology, he said.

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