

Local Control At Its Finest

Local control is what consumer-owned public utilities are all about. Klickitat PUD (KPUD) is run by a three-member board of commissioners consisting of local residents elected by their neighbors to steer the utility in a manner most responsive to Klickitat County residents.

This concept continues to be demonstrated in the board's responsibility for running seven water and five wastewater systems throughout the county. They run as separate financial entities for the communities they serve.

In 2004, the commissioners established a Water-Wastewater Advisory Committee made up of representatives from each community. The committee meets quarterly and tackles problems related to the water/wastewater systems. KPUD believes it is the "caretaker" of these systems, and the systems belong to the communities themselves. KPUD provides the expertise, financial resources and manpower to operate the systems within industry guidelines and in a sound financial manner. However, the ultimate benefit and financial responsibility lies with each community.

The committee debated the difficult issue of standby fees at its January meeting. Customers with inactive services—due to vacations, empty lots, etc.—are charged a standby fee to reserve, or "hold," a space on the system, if they are anticipating an eventual return or future need for services.

Standby fees may be the most misunderstood and unpopular of KPUD charges. It is seen as a fee from which you receive no benefit, or as an unfair charge. But someone must pay the cost to maintain a system for the eventual return of an idle service—if not by the people who hope to return to service, then by the remaining customers actively receiving service.

Our current across-the-board policy is to charge standby fees on all water/wastewater systems. However, these fees make more sense for some systems than others. Elimination of standby fees would mean an increase in rates for the remaining active customers.

For systems that are at—or nearly at—the maximum number of connections allowed by the state, a standby fee makes good sense. If a customer with an idle or inactive account expects to be reconnected when they want to resume service, they should pay to reserve their spot. Otherwise, they potentially prevent others from connecting to the system.

In some instances, the systems have no immediate growth restrictions and have formed local utility districts, in which case customers already have paid for their capacity through lot assessments. In this scenario, a standby fee could be viewed as paying twice for the same service.

The committee members decided to take the standby fee issue back to their respective community councils for direction. Each council is reviewing its specific circumstances to submit a recommendation back to the KPUD staff on how its community wants to handle its standby fees.

This is local control at its finest!

Tom D. Svendsen, General Manager