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THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO

TODD GLORIA

MAYOR

RECEIVED

AUG 28 2024

PRESIDING

August 28, 2024

Honorable Maureen F. Hallahan
Presiding Judge of the Superior Court
1100 Union Street, 10th Floor
San Diego, CA 92101

Re: Grand Jury Report: "Where's My Water Bill?"

Dear Judge Hallahan:

Pursuant to California Penal Code Section 933.05(a), (b), and (c), the City of San Diego provides the attached response to the findings and recommendations included in the above-referenced Grand Jury Report.

If you require additional information or have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Kohta Zaiser, Council Affairs Advisor, at 619-236-6330.

Sincerely,

TODD GLORIA
Mayor
City of San Diego

Attachments:

- 1. City of San Diego Response to San Diego County Grand Jury Report Titled "Where's My Water Bill?"

cc: Jonathan Vinoskey, Foreperson, 2023/2024 San Diego County Grand Jury
 Honorable Council President Sean Elo-Rivera and Members of the City Council
 Honorable City Attorney Mara Elliot
 Charles Modica, Independent Budget Analyst
 Paola Avila, Chief of Staff, Office of the Mayor
 Eric Dargan, Chief Operating Officer
 Christiana Gauger, Chief Compliance Officer

**City of San Diego Response to
San Diego County Grand Jury Report Titled
"Where's My Water Bill?"**

Pursuant to California Penal Code Section 933(c), the City of San Diego provides the following response from the Mayor to the applicable findings and recommendations included in the above referenced Grand Jury Report.

RESPONSE TO FINDINGS:

Finding 1: *The Public Utilities Department does not meet the City of San Diego's goal of providing high quality public service with a customer-focused culture.*

Response: **The Mayor agrees with the Grand Jury's finding.**

The Public Utilities Department (PUD) continues to improve its customer service focus. Since October 2023, PUD staff has completed all meter reading routes and has increased meter replacements from 350 a month to 1,150 a month. Also, since October 2023, with additional staff, training, and changes in resource allocations, the number of accounts with held bills has been reduced by 34 percent. Staffing challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a backlog of accounts with held bills. PUD continues to actively recruit and fill its vacant Customer Services Representative and Meter Reader positions. PUD is also currently working on a number of solutions to improve the quality of service provided to customers: 1) developing an improved online customer portal that will provide greater ease of use for customers; 2) redesigning the Customer Care web pages to make it easier for customers to navigate the site and find answers to questions and use online services; 3) leveraging additional Amazon Connect technologies to streamline work processes for greater call efficiency and training; and 4) evaluating the existing SAP billing utility software to determine whether to replace it.

Finding 2: *Customer dissatisfaction arises from long call wait times and a lack of response when concerns are sent by email.*

Response: **The Mayor agrees with the Grand Jury's finding.**

PUD staff have been working to reduce customer call wait times. With additional staffing resources, improved training, a new Amazon Connect phone system, and the introduction of webforms in March 2023, the average speed of answer for the call center went from 90-120 minutes to 25 minutes in July. PUD continues to identify and address root causes that negatively impact response times. PUD will continue to fill its vacant positions to provide more customer support resources, leverage technology to improve operational efficiencies, and train and develop its customer support employees.

Finding 3: *Customers are not incentivized to use the web portal due to the lack of response to their web portal requests.*

Response: **The Mayor disagrees in part with the Grand Jury's finding.**

Since launching webforms in March 2023, the rate of customers using webforms through July 2024 has grown 288 percent. PUD webform requests are processed within 10 business days unless a customer cannot read their meter and requests a Field Representative to go out to their residence or place of business to take the read. Requests made through the MyWaterSD customer portal create an email backlog. PUD is developing an improved online customer portal that will provide greater ease of use for customers and automate requests (currently this is done via a manual process) and is looking to identify a technology resource to better curate and respond to all customer requests.

Finding 4: *There is a lack of transparency regarding progress toward meeting Call Center key performance indicators and regarding the water bill appeal process.*

Response: **The Mayor agrees with the Grand Jury's finding.**

To better address transparency and Call Center performance, PUD has established three Call Center Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for Fiscal Year 2025:

- 1) Customer Satisfaction in post-call surveys. The goal is 90% of customers rating the satisfaction of their service either "Very Satisfied," or "Satisfied."
- 2) One-Call Resolution in post-call surveys. The goal is 70%.
- 3) Percentage of accurate meter reads. The goal is 100%.

PUD agrees there is a lack of transparency on the bill appeal process. PUD staff will address billing processes, including ensuring policies and procedures are up to date and clarifying areas of confusion (i.e. the billing appeal process).

Finding 5: *The lack of communication about withheld water bills increases customer dissatisfaction.*

Response: **The Mayor agrees with the Grand Jury's finding.**

PUD has updated its Held Bill Notice to customers to provide more and clearer information regarding their held bills. The updated Held Bill Notice includes weblinks for customers to request a payment plan or to have their meter read. It also includes information on making a payment on their account before a bill is received, and the QR code directs the customer to a FAQ page that provides additional information on withheld bills.

RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATIONS:

Recommendation 1: *The 2023/2024 San Diego County Grand Jury recommends the Mayor of San Diego direct the Public Utilities Department to establish and maintain a public dashboard on the PUD website tracking call center key performance indicators.*

Response: **The recommendation has not yet been implemented but will be implemented early next year.**

PUD staff will use Amazon Connect Call Center data and SAP billing/meter reading data and, in coordination with the City's IT Web Team, will post a public dashboard to reflect these KPIs and update that information monthly. The ability to create a public dashboard did not exist until PUD implemented Amazon Connect. The recommendation has not yet been implemented but is estimated to start early next year.

Recommendation 2: *The 2023/2024 San Diego County Grand Jury recommends the Mayor of San Diego direct the Public Utilities Department to generate an automatic acknowledgement of the receipt of an email and the expected response time.*

Response: The recommendation has not yet been implemented but will be implemented in the next year.

PUD currently has an auto-response to emails sent to CustomerCare@sandiego.gov but the auto-response does not provide an expected response time. Once the aforementioned operational improvements have been made, as stated in PUD's response to Finding 1, PUD can better ascertain what an expected response time is and provide that in its email autoreply message. The recommendation has not yet been implemented but is expected to be implemented by the end of 2025.

Recommendation 3: *The 2023/2024 San Diego County Grand Jury recommends the Mayor of San Diego direct the Public Utilities Department to create an appeal process for customers who want to dispute their water bill and identify this process on the PUD website.*

Response: The recommendation has not yet been implemented but will be implemented in the next year.

PUD is currently in the process of hiring a management position to address customer billing issues. The responsibility of making the bill dispute process more transparent to customers will reside in that role. PUD staff will coordinate with the City's IT Web Team to post information on PUD's website on how to dispute a water bill. The recommendation has not yet been implemented but is expected to be implemented by the end of 2025.

Recommendation 4: *The 2023/2024 San Diego County Grand Jury recommends the Mayor of San Diego direct the Public Utilities Department to create a more detailed customer communication system to use when a water bill verification requires more than 4-6 months.*

Response: The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted.

PUD resources are focused on addressing the backlog of customer accounts with held bills, and PUD has made consistent progress in reducing this backlog. Since October 2023, PUD has reduced this backlog by 38 percent while also preventing any increase in the total number of accounts with held bills. Additionally, PUD has updated its Held Bill Notice to provide more and clearer information to address customer concerns. PUD's intent is to significantly reduce, if not eliminate, the backlog.