

Item 24-1102: Wastewater Treatment Plant Table of Organization Change Proposal Human Resources Information Technology Committee

Wed, Aug 28, 2024 6:30PM

Alderson Vaya Jones (District 10) 00:51

All right. We have no public hearings or appearances. We will move on to our action items. Number 24-1102 wastewater treatment plant table of organization. change proposal.

Alderson Sheri Hartzheim (District 13) 01:02

Move for approval.

Alderson Chris Croatt (District 14) 01:03

Second.

Alderson Vaya Jones (District 10) 01:05

Move and a second. Director Rachman.

Director Jay Ratchman (HR) 01:10

Sure, chair, with your permission, I'd ask that our utilities director come in first.

Alderson Vaya Jones (District 10) 01:14

Wonderful. And we are number six. Director Stempa.

Director Chris Stempa (Utilities) 01:23

So, I'm not going to read verbatim the memorandum—uh the memo. There's a lot in here, but at its core—and I want to preface this by saying that this is not a change that was done as a result of a group or staff members that haven't been doing their work or their jobs. It's really—the origins of it are something greater, and it's something that a lot of businesses are experiencing now. It's just a change in the ranks file and not having a former model of employment that we once did. It's—we don't—we can't rely on 20 plus year veterans to bring people up with people waiting in line to get into municipal operations in the wastewater. This is a field that we—that I saw—many of us saw years ago, with not having as many people going to school to do this type of work, because there's other occupations that are more appealing, and so supply and demand economics, as simple as that.

Director Chris Stempa (Utilities) 02:16

But over the last couple years, as we've had vacancies, it's been more challenging to fill 'em. Again, not uncommon. But as it relates to municipal wastewater operations, we've been doing stay interviews for a while now, but just with exit interviews and conversations with the candidates that we've had come in that have interviewed but then backed out, there's a common theme, and I'll just start with—and I have 'em listed here, but the theme being internally it's a fairly quick turnaround, the way the structure is with the four-operator crew that are on shifts, rotating shifts. And, yeah, the day shift may not be as bad, and these folks get acclimated to it, but there's only so many people to fill in those shifts. And so, when there is a vacancy and it has to be filled, somebody's making up the difference. And that becomes problematic with really a group of 10 in total, two of which are scheduled to do what we call our dewater—dewatering operations. It's a different part of the process.

Director Chris Stempa (Utilities) 03:18

Another theme that we've heard is over the years is for those that are not commonly on day shift, there's a lack of exposure, so they're not always in the loop with some of the projects, updates. Training can be hard to schedule at times, because when you do have to pull these people in, they may be doing a quick turn off a night shift. So it is, it's challenging. There's a reason why, in a lot of places, these people make a little bit more money because of that shift—the demands of the shift, the turnaround the shift, the sacrifices they make on their bodies on the shifts. And so, as time has gone on, younger people in general, it's hard to find people want to do that, and if they do, it's short term.

Director Chris Stempa (Utilities) 04:00

Another theme from those that fill in these shifts—so we have a relief operator group—so let's back up. We got four, what we call, liquids operators, or wastewater treatment operators. We have four relief operators that fill in for the liquids operations group. They fill in for these two solids operator group—the solids operator group, which is two people. So, the wastewater operators generally handle most of the plant operations. We call it liquid train, and meets up at some bridge in between different parts of the process. The solids group does the back end of the plant, right? They take all the stuff that comes out of our digesters—if you have any knowledge of what our treatment train is. And the equipment is kind of like paper mill equipment, like large presses, and then they de-water it, handle the solids loading part when it goes out the farm fields. And there's other things I'm probably skipping over here. The relief operator group's kind of the hub. So they fill in when needed. They do maintenance assistance tasks, cleaning, so on and so forth. They're asked to probably be more versatile, but that's the structure of our group right now.

Director Chris Stempa (Utilities) 05:06

And we've been finding it challenging to fill, really every position when they're vacant, but mostly the wastewater operator group. Currently we have two vacancies. We've gone out, I think, three times—or will be three times—for the relief operator. We have two vacancies, which leaves two spots open, which is two less people to fill in, which can be problematic with the way this is currently structured.

Director Chris Stempa (Utilities) 05:32

And the last thing that's been a common theme is the flexibility. So, with the more structured organization (drilling down to and honing in on certain skill sets that are asked between these three different groups) it's hard to accommodate flexibility with time off or a doctor's appointment, for say, when you're on a shift. You just can't do it right. Somebody's waiting for you to come on. To help facilitate an appointment PSPTO exists, but you still have to fill that two hours and so on and so forth. So, the flexibility isn't what it might otherwise be with what's been proposed here, and I will say this wasn't—there wasn't a unanimous applause when this was delivered to staff. I mean, it's an adjustment.

Director Chris Stempa (Utilities) 06:20

At its heart the change is going to be having a unified job class, which, in my mind, provides a whole bunch of benefits to the organization—versatility, resilient—resiliency. It checks off most of the boxes with the concerns that have been voiced by, again, internal staff, exiting staff, and people that have been interviewed over the last year or so. The schedule that was attached to this is really just a supplemental. It's a concept schedule. We believe it can work, but I can't say that that's going to be the structure a year from now, or the schedule a year from now. So, I just want to make that clear too, have us provide it as an example, a concept we're discussing yet. We believe it can work. There's going to be some tweaks to it, but the TO change is the TO change. That's what we're discussing now. That's what we see going forward. Hopefully that helps alleviate some of the issues that we've been experiencing.

Director Chris Stempa (Utilities) 07:13

Along with the TO change, and Jay can get into this too, is that a pay grade change would accompany this, and I don't want to get too much in the weeds with comparables, but we have been noticing with folks have been interviewing, especially some of our neighbors, our current pay grade isn't overly competitive, so we have not been able to attract anybody with any experience and education and all the historical requisites that we've just took for granted. That's been disappointing. And it's not a reflection on Jay or anybody else. It's just the nature of the beast right now. And so, with this TO change and the pay grade change, we're hoping to be more competitive.

Director Chris Stempa (Utilities) 07:55

I would love to recruit people that check those boxes off. I've equated to the operations—and again, this could be the same for any business—as Jenga, and you start hiring a lot of "okays" and settling, at some point you're going to pull enough pieces out and you're going to have something fail. Somebody's going to get hurt, and I don't want that on my hands. And so having some more tools at our disposal to get people in here that want to work and know what they're doing—and that's not to say that's not what we have now, but again, we have two vacancies; that will continue. These are some tools that are much needed.

Director Chris Stempa (Utilities) 08:31

There's a lead operator proposal in here, an assignment. It's not a TO change, but it's an assignment, something that we currently don't have. Again, it's another tool that we hope that's going to that's going to be incentivizing staff, encouraging staff, helping engage staff. It's not going to be universally applied, and just like the p—the pay grade change—just to back up again, I apologize, that's not something that would be retroactive. So again, with a with a the pay grade change, there wouldn't be a uniform lift across all the staff, but it basically raises the ceiling, provides opportunity under our current system, and lets us advertise at a higher range to draw some attention that currently—and I can verify this because it's been said, there's been people that have been looking, not currently working, but elsewhere, that don't even look click on our advertisement anymore because it's the same thing and its pay. So, in a nutshell, that's what it is. I don't know if Jay wants to fill any blanks that I that I missed there.

Aldersperson Vaya Jones (District 10) 09:33

Yep, absolutely. You are number two.

Director Jay Ratchman (HR) 09:36

District Two. Great. Thank you. So, we've been working with Utilities for quite a while on this table of organization change, and I gave our director a lot of credit, because change is not easy. It's very similar to our conversations about Valley Transit. At some point when you're doing what you've been doing, and it's not working, whether it's drawing people in or retaining them, you need to listen and you need to step back. And that's what our Utilities Director is doing. Overall, I feel this is a very positive change for the Utilities Department. I think a lot of employees are really going to like the new rotation. Of course, not everyone's going to like that, at least initially.

Director Jay Ratchman (HR) 10:12

But a few things about compensation. This creates parity with the water plant. We have a water plant operator right now that is in a pay grade higher than wastewater. Now, by creating this unified position, it creates parity, because we have seen employees who have moved over to water from wastewater simply because there's a higher rate of pay. So that's the first thing.

Director Jay Ratchman (HR) 10:34

The second thing is, in the proposal it talks about what would be the cost impact, and Director Stempa has outlined that approximately \$22,000. So, a couple things in regards to that. One is for 2024 they do have vacant salary dollars because they're holding positions open, and then that would be included in the 2025 budget that Utilities is submitting. The one thing that's hard to account for is there's probably going to be a cost savings as well of not having to backfill with overtime, having highly trained individuals, and not having to retrain. That is not factored into the 2022—er the \$22,000 because it's just hard to, like, figure out what that would be.

Director Jay Ratchman (HR) 11:18

The other thing—I thought there was one other thing I wanted to make sure that I outlined. I think that's the—really, that's the big things. I wanted to hit the compensation, and we did a full, full review of the position through our—it's called the Safe System that we got from our compensation consultant, and it strongly lands in pay grade seven. So, I feel very comfortable with that pay grade change.

Alderson Vaya Jones (District 10) 11:44

So just a quick question with the compensation. So not raising all salaries, just the ranges, and that that is not so that you can hire the same level you have now, but pay them more. It's for someone with more experience worthy of a higher wage, so that you can provide them that. Is that what you're saying?

Director Chris Stempa (Utilities) 12:07

It is, and with that comes another problem or challenge too, and that's equity and compression, right? So, the reality is in order to continue operations in the way that we've been asked to operate and keep people safe as part of it, and be compliant with our permit, we do need to bring people in that have those skill sets, and again, this is a tool to do that. But on the other side, yeah, the reality is, if you bring somebody else in at a higher range, that's a challenge that will have to be faced.

Alderson Vaya Jones (District 10) 12:41

But you're ready for that? You've thought about that? Also thank you for that Jenga metaphor. That was actually—that was great for my brain. So, thank you very much. That was really great. Other questions from the committee. Alderson Hartzheim.

Alderson Sheri Hartzheim (District 13) 12:56

Thank you, Chair. I want to be sure I understand this, because I briefly overheard some discussion about "What is the item to be approved?" and I actually put the motion forward. So, I want to be clear that the TO change comes with this new position which includes this new range of pay, or this increased range of pay, but you expect that all the operators that will now fall into this (once it's approved) fall into this category, will remain at the same pay, except when this shift differential kicks in or that kind of different changes in shift lead to an increase in pay for some of them.

Director Jay Ratchman (HR) 13:42

That is correct. So, the table of organization is instead of having three very different positions, you have one. Position moves into a different pay grade, but employees will be placed in the new pay grade. Equity issues will be dealt with as they come up. That's with every single city position. If we hire someone, someone's been on staff for a long time, you have to look at that so you don't lose that employee as well. In regards to the pay codes that you're referring to, those exist today. They're all within the salary administration policy or the fringe benefit policy, so we are not adding things that they don't already have for differentials or holiday pay, etc.

Aldersperson Sheri Hartzheim (District 13) 14:24

Thank you. That clarifies it much better for me. I mean, I thought I understand it—stood it pretty well, but I just wanted to make sure that it was clear for the public listening as well. And I really feel like this is a positive change. It's probably going to be, like you said, pretty stressful for the people who are going to be experiencing it, but I think as an organization, this makes the most sense moving forward. Thank you.

Aldersperson Vaya Jones (District 10) 14:46

Aldersperson Croatt?

Aldersperson Chris Croatt (District 14) 14:48

No nothing. I can just really appreciate the amount of work that went into this.

Director Jay Ratchman (HR) 14:51

Thank you.

Aldersperson Chris Croatt (District 14) 14:52

Thanks for the level of detail that you've shared.

Aldersperson Vaya Jones (District 10) 14:55

Great. We have a motion and a second. We got our information. All those in favor signify by saying aye. Aye. Any opposed? Abstentions? It passes three, zero.