

...Eight reasons to vote 'no' on the Water District measure

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ered under a contract between the seven-union District Council of Trade Unions and the City of Portland. Their benefits are administered by the City. Their seniority and transfer rights are defined within the City. How does that work when they're no longer employees of the City? Presumably lawyers will figure that out in court if it passes.

The Water District, pitched as a way to bring accountability to water bills, could end up being less accountable. Which is more answerable to the public, one career politician looking to get re-elected, or seven elected officeholders you've never heard of who oversee a general manager? A full-time City commissioner who keeps office hours and attends three public sessions a week, or a volunteer board member who meets once a month? A body like City Hall that gets routine media coverage, or a body like the Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation Board or the Multnomah Educational Service District that rarely if ever see a reporter? The new Water District would be like the latter in each of those examples. For all its flaws, in Portland's commission form of government, the lines of accountability are actually pretty direct. The mayor appoints one elected commissioner to be in charge of a bureau,

full-time, with day-to-day oversight. A bureau screw-up, like a bad computer system for water billing, means public disgrace for the commissioner in charge (in that case Commissioner Eric Sten, who resigned in 2008.) If you're angry about the Water Bureau funding public restrooms or a water-conserving showcase home, you can vow never again to vote for Commissioner Randy Leonard (who decided not to run for reelection in 2012.)

There's no particular reason to think water and sewer rates will fall, and there are reasons they might go up. There's no question water and sewer rates are high in Portland — they're sixth highest of America's top 50 cities. But most of that goes to repay bonds for some very expensive projects that were mandated by the federal government — including the \$1.4 billion "Big Pipe," the largest public works project in Portland's history (incidentally, completed on time and on budget by an overwhelmingly union workforce.) The new district would still be liable to repay those debts. And it might face higher interest rates. It turns out that the City has one of the best bond ratings in country, which gives it access to the lowest possible interest rates for capital construction. The new district would also have to duplicate the

City's overhead: HR, legal, mechanic operations, et cetera.

As the word gets out about these facts, signs are popping up all over Portland like mushrooms after a rain: "Stop the Bull Run Takeover." The campaign is headed up by AFSCME, which has put up \$40,000 so far to fight the measure, joined by International Association of Fire Fighters, IBEW Local 48, and UFCW Local 555 contributing \$5,000 each. And they've assembled a formidable coalition of environmental and business groups. The Audubon Society has contributed \$10,000. So have all three of the public utilities: Northwest Natural Gas, PacifiCorp, and PGE. [It turns out that when you tear up roads to work on water and sewer lines, you have to interact a lot with electric and gas utilities. Those companies don't want to risk a system they think works well. The contractor community is stepping in as well, and no wonder. When's the last time legislation barred your company from public contracts — just because you had the technical competence or business savvy to have won previous contracts in the last six years? Companies like Stacy and Witbeck, CH2M Hill, Beam Construction & Management, Brown and Coldwell have chipped in \$5,000 each.

Now it's up to voters.

IN MEMORIAM

Labor historian **EDWARD BEECHERT**, an active member of the Pacific Northwest Labor History Association, died in Albany, Oregon, April 13. He was 93.

Beechert taught labor and economic history at the University of Hawaii's Hilo and Manoa campuses from 1963 until his retirement in 1988. Previously, he taught at Mexico City College and in California at Ventura College, Modesto College, Sacramento State College, and Saint Mary's College.

Born in Hawthorne, California on June 10, 1920, Beechert first joined a labor union at age 14 and never stopped organizing for peace and justice.

He put himself through UC Berkeley as a Teamster cab driver and grocery clerk in the Retail Food Clerks Union.

He served in Europe with the Army in 1943-46 and returned to Berkeley to earn his master's degree and a doctorate of philosophy.

He is author of "Working in

Hawaii," a history of labor in the Islands; "Honolulu: Crossroads of the Pacific," and many articles and papers about plantation and labor history.

After his retirement, Beechert and his wife, Alice, moved to Pacific Grove, California. Later they moved to Albany, Oregon, where he was active in the Northwest Labor History Association and conducted oral histories for ILWU Local 5 at Powell's Books.

In February 2009, Beechert was diagnosed with Parkinsons.

He is survived by his wife; three children; and two granddaughters.

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