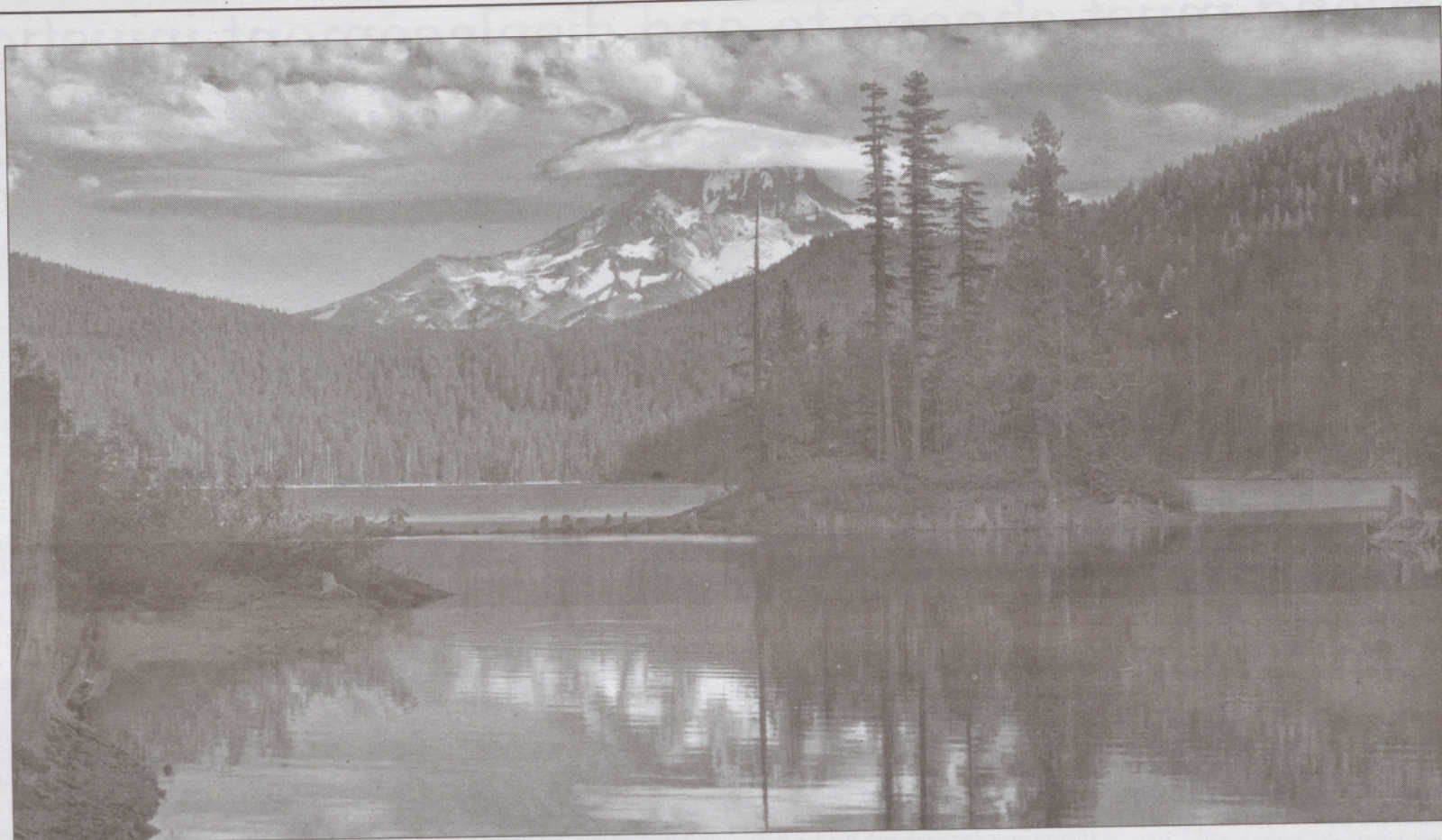




The Bull Run watershed, the primary source for Portland's drinking water.

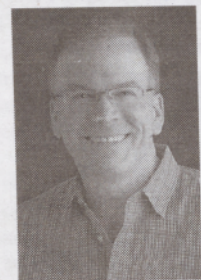
The state of our public utilities

An annual report on the city of Portland's water and sewer programs

BY NICK FISH
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

In February 2014, Portland was hit with a severe winter storm – snow, ice and freezing rain. Most Portlanders hunkered down at home, waiting it out.

The Portland Water Bureau worked around the clock to respond to more than 1,000 calls for service – four times the normal rate. We repaired nine water main breaks, fixed broken hydrants, and responded to homeowners with burst frozen pipes.



Nick Fish is a Portland City Commissioner

I visited crews working in the bitter cold to restore service to homes and businesses across our community. During the emergency, they rolled up their sleeves and kept our water flowing.

This is just one example of how the men and women of our public utilities go above and beyond to serve Portlanders, and why I am so proud to lead them.

As a Portlander, I already knew that the Water Bureau delivers the best water in the country, and that the Bureau of Environmental Services (BES) is a national leader in green infrastructure and watershed health. After two years as commissioner in charge, I have an even deeper appreciation

for the quality of the services our utilities provide, the dedication and professionalism of our employees, and the challenges we still face.

Building on a solid foundation

The Water Bureau proudly delivers high-quality, safe, and reliable water to nearly 1 million customers in the region. It's a pretty good value, too: we charge about a penny for two gallons of water.

The Bull Run Watershed supplies most of our fresh, unfiltered water, and its 19-billion gallon capacity is replenished each year by rainfall. The Columbia South Shore Well Field is our back-up – after the Bull Run, it's the largest water supply in the state.

The bureau is a good steward of ratepayer money, earning the highest credit rating possible: AAA. That means we can borrow cheap money to finance the rebuilding of our aging infrastructure.

BES, the city's sewer, stormwater, and watershed health bureau, continues to be a national leader in green infrastructure. We harness nature to manage stormwater runoff, keeping bad stuff out of our rivers and saving ratepayer money.

Most Portlanders live within one of five watersheds, managed by BES. Strong watersheds protect public health, support native fish and wildlife and make our community more livable.

Welcoming new leadership

This year, I appointed new leaders at both utilities.

Mike Stuhr took the reins of the Water Bureau. As the bureau's former chief engineer, Mike's biggest strengths include managing complex projects and making our system more resilient. One of his first acts as Director was to appoint Teresa Elliott as chief engineer – the first woman to hold the position.

I selected Mike Jordan to lead BES. Mike has had a long and distinguished career in public service – holding leadership positions at Metro, county government and the state of Oregon.

Together, the two Mikes manage more than 1,000 hard-working employees, \$20 billion in public assets and a combined annual budget of nearly \$1.5 billion.

Stabilizing rates

For two years in a row, we've held the combined rate increases below 5 percent – a significant reduction from original forecasts. The average residential ratepayer now pays \$99.37 a month. About 1/3 of the bill is for water; 2/3 is for sewer/stormwater.

Rates are influenced by a number of factors: The cost to replace our aging infrastructure; the need to make our system more resilient and able to withstand an earthquake; and the price tag for the "Big Pipe" and other unfunded federal mandates like the Safe Drinking Water Act.

Expanding our low-income discount program

Utility costs hit older adults on fixed incomes and struggling families the hardest.

That's why we're working with Multnomah County and other community partners to expand our low-income discount program.

Currently, nearly 8,000 households get a monthly discount equaling about half their utility bill – saving about \$550 each year. But thousands more low-income families and older adults can't yet access the program.

Earlier this year, I appointed a work group to identify ways we could reach more people. This month, we'll release the task force's report – and later this fall, I'll lay out our plan to expand the discount program to more customers.

Focusing on our core mission

We have to earn the public's trust every day. When I took over this portfolio, I knew that some Portlanders were concerned about increasing costs and projects straying beyond the bureaus' core missions. So I directed the bureaus to eliminate activities that were not focused on providing the highest quality services to ratepayers.

Strengthening oversight and accountability

Last year, Street Roots challenged the City to have "more responsive and responsible utility oversight."

This summer, we launched the Portland Utility Board (PUB), fulfilling a promise I made and building on the recommendations of a Blue Ribbon panel. The PUB is a nine-member citizen body, charged with

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