

Water for all

Portland Water Bureau hopes to expand its low-income rate assistance programs and tap a previously unreachable body of at-risk renters

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In 1995, Portland's water bureau became one of the first in the nation to offer a low-income discount program to residents. It began with the goal of reaching 10,000 customers.

It has never met that goal, in part because of the challenge associated with reaching some of the city's lowest-income renters.

The problem for Portland and cities across the country is finding a way to support people in need who pay for the utility through rent, but who don't get billed and do not have their own account with the bureau: People in multi-family buildings.

This week, the Portland Water Bureau presented its plan before a City Council work session, highlighting a new program to provide up to \$500 in utility crisis assistance per year to qualified households on the verge of eviction.

City Commissioner Nick Fish, who heads up the water bureau, called the proposal "something of a breakthrough."

"We are in the midst of a historic housing crisis. The solution has long eluded our public utilities," Fish said.

The new crisis assistance for multi-family renters would be administered through Home Forward, the region's housing authority, which already works directly with low-income renters and their landlords. The money would be paid to landlords in the form of rent through the existing short-term rental assistance program, which helps households weather catastrophic economic periods and retain their housing.

The \$500 figure was determined to cover 80 percent of the cost of the average annual

consumption of water and sewer services in a Portland apartment. The bureau hopes to reach 1,200 at-risk households with the new multi-family rental program.

The goals, according to Liam Frost, special projects manager with the water bureau, included reaching people who needed and qualified for the safety net and prevent those basic services from being shut-off.

"It's not going to be a surprise to you that affordability of housing is one of the main issues facing the city, not unlike many other cities in the United States," Frost told the council members. "As housing costs have caused this affordability issue in Portland, it leaves less on the table for lower income households to cover basic and essential services like water and sewer."

Frost said that the cost of this program, along with proposed expansions in the assistance programs the bureau currently offers, will be covered through utility rates, which are expected to increase to cover the \$2.14 million in new costs incurred by the water bureau and the city's Bureau of Environmental Services.

Many aspects of the plan, along with setting rates, are still to be worked out in upcoming budget work sessions. Once finalized, the new plan won't go into affect until July, after the city budget is approved.

Currently, 6,600 low-income customers making 60 percent or less of the median family income receive 50 percent discounts

to their bill. Ultimately, the goal is to prevent costly and traumatic service shut-offs to those households.

Other proposals to help low-income customers include increasing the value of crisis vouchers, currently set at the 2004 rate of \$150, and adjusting income qualification guidelines to be more in line with the city of Portland, rather than the lower statewide figure, established in the 1990s.

"In that time, Portland's income profile has obviously diverged from places like Josephine County," Frost said. "There's a \$10,000 a year difference there."

Fish was quick to point out that the new program with Home Forward has been reviewed by attorneys who believe it to be in line with the bureau's charter and the legal parameters for ratepayer expenditures. In December, the city settled a 2011 lawsuit alleging it missused ratepayer monies on an assortment of expenditures. The city settled for \$10 million.

"This builds on an existing program," Fish said. "They have given us a legal opinion that it is consistent with the charter

and at the discretion of the council."

Having running water isn't just an issue of comfort and sanitation, it's state code: Oregon requires homes to have water

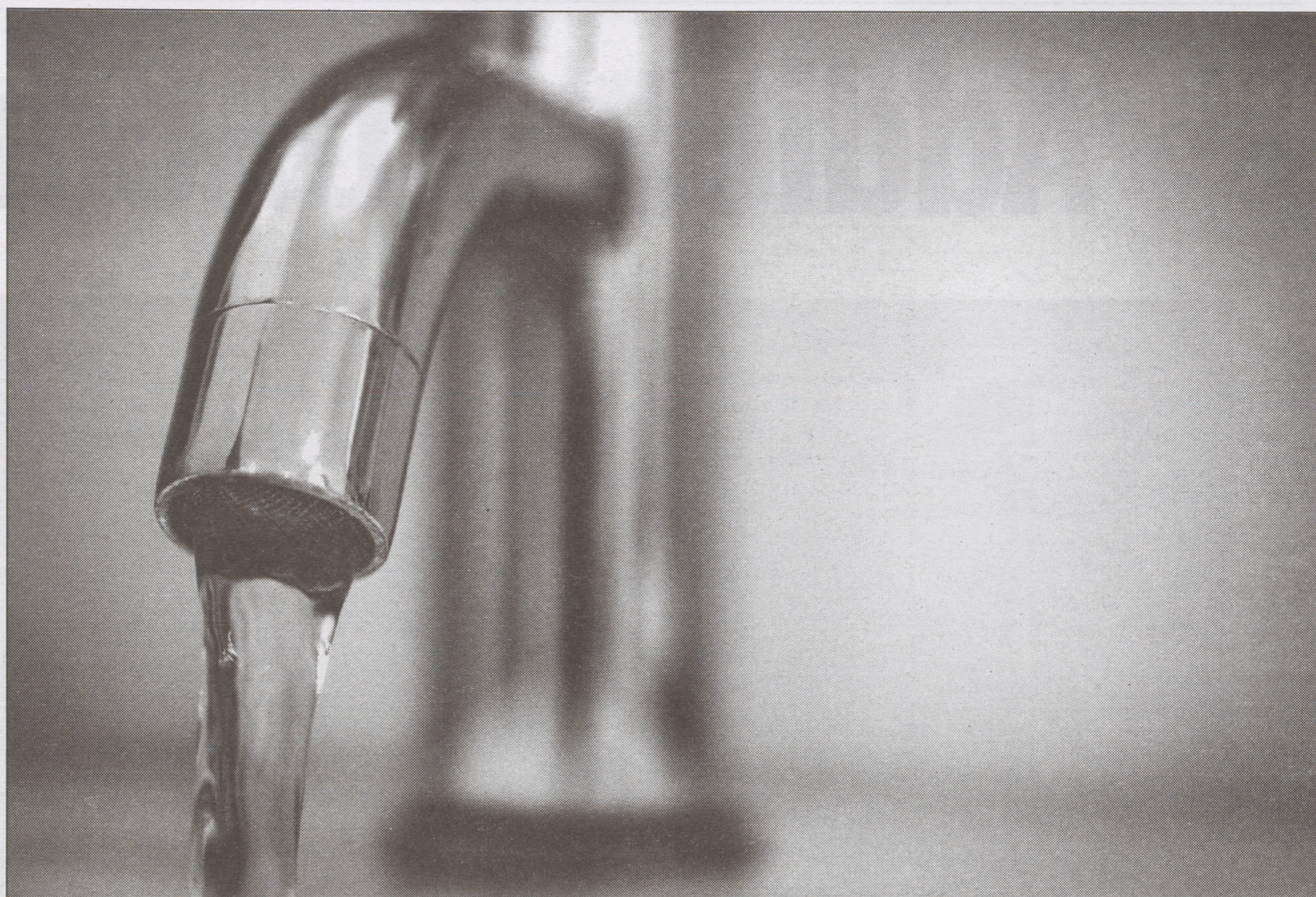
service to be considered habitable.

Commissioner Dan Saltzman said he would like to see an additional policy added to the bureau's plan: That if children live in a home where the water has been disconnected for nonpayment for more than a month, that the family is reported to state child protective services.

Saltzman, who has long been a champion for children's issues, called those shut-off conditions tantamount to child abuse.

Fish responded saying there could be legal ramifications to such a policy, but that they will work with Saltzman's office to explore their options. Fish said that kind of interagency reporting raises questions around privacy and immigration rights, as well as concerns about criminalizing parents for living in episodic poverty.

The council will be discussing the proposal further during budget work sessions in March.



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— LIAM FROST,
PORTLAND WATER BUREAU

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