

# A NEW BOSS AT EWEB

*Frank Lawson takes on  
water, biomass and more*

**FRANK LAWSON  
MOVES INTO A NEW  
POSITION AT EWEB**

PHOTO: LARSEN PHOTOGRAPHY

**J**ust months into his new gig as Eugene Water & Electric Board's general manager, Frank Lawson brings outside experience and insider knowledge to the state's largest publicly owned utility. With EWEB's recent controversies, it's a challenging management task, one that Lawson seems confident he's up for.

"I have experience in sales, in marketing, in finance, in engineering, in operations," Lawson says. "I've also worked in a variety of different types of organizations, ranging from 80 to 80,000 people."

Lawson, who started in June, says he aims to keep costs down and value up, all the while looking toward opportunities and anticipating problems that lie ahead in the ever-shifting power and water marketplaces. Two looming tests of his abilities include the Seneca biomass plant and EWEB's riverfront property.

Lawson worked for the utility for six years as an electric systems engineering supervisor before taking on the GM role. Previously his background included nearly 17 years in the private sector including eight years in marketing and engineering at Danaher Corporation and then almost nine at Jeld-Wen as electrical and automation engineering manager. As such, his goals as EWEB's GM include running a tighter, more customer-oriented organization that includes greater transparency with — and participation from — the utility's consumers. The GM position has a base salary of \$250,000 a year.

The move back to Eugene from Medford carried personal significance for Lawson: He grew up here, earned his bachelor's degree just up the road at Oregon State University and an MBA in Eugene at Northwest Christian University. His father, a widower to whom he wished to be closer, lives here.

## FULL SPEED AHEAD

Lawson wasted little time showing he was serious about shaking things up at EWEB.

He had been the new GM only a few weeks when he sliced the previous upper management team by more than half — from a dozen down to just five. In addition, he assigned Erin Erben, the former power resources manager, to a new position, chief customer officer, to coalesce previously scattered departments of public affairs, public relations and communications, as well as customer service, in one operation under the umbrella of the new Customer Solutions department.

"I knew I had some things I could do right away. Some of it was realigning the leadership team. I'd originally said it would take about 30 days, and it took 34 days," Lawson says, with a touch of pride.

However, in discussion, he appears to be quite aware he has inherited many EWEB skeptics in the greater Eugene community, some of whom view the utility's past decisions and actions with jaundiced eyes. And those eyes are now trained on him.

## CUSTOMER FOCUS

In conversation, Lawson's marketing orientation becomes apparent quickly.

"You'll probably find I talk a lot about customers," he says.

And he does, discussing his thoughts about water purity, electricity and the safety and reliability of each on behalf of customers. He knows what's already working well but acknowledges enhancements are needed to improve relationships with customers.

"As a customer, when you come to EWEB to get service, do you get good service, do you get it quickly, do you get what you need? Or, do you get the run-around, do you get transferred a lot ... these are indications that we can do better," Lawson says.

EWEB has considered doing more outreach and increasing transparency in its goals and actions, he says. "However, a big piece of customer trust is, if customers just see this as a shell game: 'Oh, this is just a way for EWEB to get more money from me,' then they're not going to participate in ways that we need them to." And he does want to encourage customer involvement in ways that will benefit both the customers and EWEB, such as working together to more efficiently manage water and electricity usage.

As a marketer, Lawson knows results hold the key to winning over consumers. Issues of affordability, transparency and rapid resolution of problems are all high on his list of priorities. He discusses variables that occur regularly in supply and demand within both the water and electric utilities and hopes to educate and engage customers more on those issues in order to elicit their aid in solving problems.

## LOOKING AHEAD ... AND BEHIND

Currently, EWEB's sole source of water is the McKenzie River via its Hayden Bridge filtration plant. The utility has publicly acknowledged that during summer months, it has only a one- or two-day supply of water in the event of a natural disaster such as a major earthquake.

Realizing the threat to water availability in that scenario, EWEB recently sought to develop an alternative source: Last year, it purchased property along the Willamette River to ultimately develop a new resource that would back up and expand water availability when needed. The intake site is located near Mount Pisgah. However, this major project is only in early stages of development and is not expected to be online until 2022.

"It's a challenge to maintain the proper quality over the next several decades while also looking at diversifying the source and looking at things that will provide resiliency in the system," Lawson says. "So it's quality versus resiliency — those are the issues and challenges of the water utility."

When it comes to electricity, EWEB has more power than customers need or use currently, so some of that excess power gets sold to other utilities, which does nothing to improve customers' opinions of EWEB's ability to manage itself. Lower oil prices, increasing availability of natural gas and fracking all have contributed to a glut of power sources no one in the industry had anticipated in recent years. And, of course, there is the Seneca biomass burning plant.

## SENSITIVE SUBJECTS

Arguably, two of the most controversial and well-documented subjects Lawson inherits in his new role are the contract with the Seneca biomass power facility, which extends through 2026, and the development of its 17 acres of riverfront property near downtown Eugene.

Initially attractive to EWEB as a source of local power if its usual sources — such as the federal Bonneville Power Administration — went down, the landscape quickly changed as environmentalists took issue with biomass fuel, and electricity markets surged. The public's outrage only increased due to state and contractually mandated secrecy about the Seneca deal.

While Lawson says he understands the outcry and plans for greater transparency going forward, he points out that Seneca represents only 3 percent of EWEB's total resources and that, therefore, its price impact on customers is minimal.

"Seneca is a small piece — of a piece — of the total cost [of expenditures]. By the time you drill down into it, Seneca, by itself, is a very small increment of total costs," he says.

As for the sale of EWEB's 17 riverfront acres, Lawson is a bit circumspect, saying only that EWEB and the city of Eugene "are in negotiations over the city's potential purchase," and that he will be having discussions with EWEB's board soon.

Back in January, the city agreed to pay EWEB \$6.5 million to \$6.9 million for the property, without regard to how much money the city actually receives from a sale.

Asked if a deal with the city was concrete, Lawson hedges a bit.

"If we can't reach a deal with the city, then EWEB will have to take a step back and go, 'How do we sell this property?' And it might be to a developer, or it might be to several developers." In any case, the EWEB-developed master plan for the property cannot be altered, no matter who the eventual buyer is, a stipulation both EWEB and the city have already determined.

"I would think within the next 60 days or so, we'll be in a position where either the sale is commencing — or not — one of those two," Lawson says. "The city's looking out for developing the community, developing the riverfront and their own financial condition. We share the goal of developing the community, though. That's what we're trying to make work." ■