

REPRESENTATIVE POLICY BOARD

CONSUMER AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

MARCH 20, 2023

MEETING TRANSCRIPTION

Stephen:

I'll call the meeting to order. We can get started anyway. The Consumer Affairs meeting for March is called to order. And the first item on the agenda is the safety moment, having to do with nutrition and good food. Always great suggestions. That's from Jennifer, so please take a look at that. Definitely all these things will impact your health, economics, and the environment. So, well covered Jennifer. Thank you. Anybody from the public, Jennifer?

Jennifer:

No, I don't see anybody here from the public.

Stephen:

Okay. And item three is approval of the minutes. And I guess if we have a quorum, we can go ahead with that. Do I have a motion to approve the minutes?

Frank:

I make a motion to approve the minutes as read.

Stephen:

Thanks Frank. Second?

Naomi:

Second.

Stephen:

Thank you Naomi. Are there any corrections, additions or omissions? All those in favor of approving the minutes, aye?

Committee:

Aye.

Stephen:

And any opposed? Any abstentions? Minutes are approved Jennifer. Item four is our presentation for today, and we're fortunate to have Lisa Di Francesco with us. Lisa, you gave this presentation to one of the other committees as well?

Lisa:

I did. Back in January I presented to the Land Use Committee. I don't think I've presented to Consumer Affairs ever, so thank you.

Stephen:

Oh yeah, no, it's great. There were some things that I think cross different committees. So we had an update on the deer hunt last meeting, which was really interesting, even though it was primarily a land use issue, but it's good for more people on the RPB to know. And boy, this was a natural for you when Covid hit, because everything went online. But my first question is, did you get any pushback comments from students because they were doing everything online, and now this was online, and they probably enjoyed coming there physically?

Lisa:

Students do enjoy coming here. More often I'm in the classroom teaching. I would say 90% of what I do is in the classroom. So even for some of them, this was taking away their field trip. I was still a break in their normal digital routine. So it was still an enjoyable aspect, just different.

Stephen:

Great. Well with that, I'll turn it over to you.

Lisa:

All right. I'm going to share my screen and pull up my presentation. So give me just a second to get to that.

Lisa:

All right, so everyone should see my first slide. As I said before, this is the first presentation I've ever given to the Consumer Affairs Committee. So there's a little bit of an overview, and I also talk part way through it about how we coped with Covid, not just a general update. So the Whitney Water Center is our education center. It is based in Hamden. We offer free hands-on water science programs to K through eight students typically. Sometimes we branch up to high school, to any town within our district. Sometimes we do go outside our district for a fee, but the demands there where I am fully booked inside our district. Our programs are available to public private schools, homeschooling organizations, Girl Scout troops, Boy Scout troops, libraries, community organizations. Any place that has an education focus within our district.

We offer outreach programs where I go to the schools, and as I was saying earlier, that's a solid 90 to 95% of what I do. There are programs we offer here at the Water center. Those are limited by busing and finance. It's just easier for me to get into the schools than it is to bring the schools to us. We have Project WATER. That's a field study. I'll talk a little bit more about that later. And we also offer loan boxes, which are self-contained science teaching kits. They have everything except water pencils, and worksheet photocopies. The in-school programs are most popular with the K through four and Project WATER far and away is the most popular option for our middle school teachers.

Since the Whitney Water Center was founded, that was 32 years ago, we've served over 364,000 students. 16,000 of them have participated in our Project WATER. I'm not sure how long some of you have been with Regional, but Kate Powell, who was my supervisor until she retired in 2019, we were

both absolutely blown out of the water at how well received Project WATER was. We never, ever expected to reach that many students, and over 50,000 students have used our water science loan boxes.

Overview these numbers for 21/22 school year. That's through the whole school year. You can see the town that participated the most in our program is Hamden, followed by New Haven and West Haven. Hamden has a large contingent because they participate in our Project WATER. Total number of students we saw in the 21/22 school year was about 6,800 students. This was still remote programs, a little bit in the classroom, but it was still full on Covid. And then 2020 and 2021, this was the start of Covid and that was only 4,300 students. So we definitely had a drop. The teachers who jumped on board with our remote programs, some of them surprised me. I never would've expected it. And on the flip side, I was surprised at some that didn't participate in the virtual programs. And again, same distribution of towns. New Haven, Hamden being the top two. That's been a typical pattern over the last 24 years.

All right, so Covid Impacts and Trends. Pre Covid, going back to the 2016/2017 school year, on average we would see 5,000 students between our onsite programs and our Project WATER. This doesn't include loan boxes. When Covid hit, the first two years of Covid, we dropped by about half to 2,600 students. This current school year, we have 3,600 students booked. So that's a 25% increase, 26% increase over our Covid years. These numbers were current as far as the bookings in January. I had teachers calling a lot in the last month, so that number has certainly gone up since then.

All right, so this is strictly classroom programs. Me going into their classrooms, not Project WATER. Before Covid, we saw about 4,200 students. During Covid, again, dropped by half, and were up to 2,800 this year. A nice 30% increase. Now Project WATER... huh, my Project WATER's not in there. So the nice thing about Project WATER is there was almost no change in participation. We had a 15% drop, and we ran that program remote, and teachers who were doing it remote are back on board with in-person programs now.

So the nice thing about the [inaudible 00:11:02] Covid is it brought digital programs into the classroom, now that I'm back in person. I had to change everything we taught and how we taught it. Because I wasn't in-person, we couldn't be using the same props, same visual aids, so they had to be digitized. And those programs are so much more visually pleasing now. There are SMART boards in all the classrooms and teachers know how to use them. So I'm able to take the programs that I used digitally, virtually and do them in-person in the classroom. Definitely enhances student engagement.

The two classroom programs that get booked the most are Invasion of the Aliens and Macro Invertebrates. One talks about invasive species, the other, Macro Invertebrates talks about water quality by looking at what lives there. These two programs comprised 30% of the classes that I teach. And these two programs by far had the biggest impact from remote teaching. They got the most visual, most changes. So it's awesome to be doing these in the classroom again.

So having to modify, adapt, and move on with what we had. One of the programs we teach is called Bartholomew and the Oobleck. We have a literary Italian with the Bartholomew and the Oobleck book by Dr. Seuss. And then we make slime and we talk about the science of how it works. I digitized the story and I did a read aloud and I put it on YouTube. When I made this presentation in January, Bartholomew and the Oobleck had 29,000 views. As of an hour ago, it's over 60,000 hours.

So it has been very, very popular. Again, Project WATER benefited from the digital modifications that we had to make. I used to go into the classroom for three classroom visits prior to the field trip. So the students had background information on watersheds, the water quality things that we were going to be testing in the field, and familiar with the area. I couldn't go into the classroom to do these instructions,

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so I ended up making the videos. They are self-contained classes, literally me teaching to the classroom, and I'll tell the teacher what they need to do. They pause it, they pass out the equipment, they start it up, the kids get more directions.

So this has allowed me to spend more time in the field with the students driving the bus, while the classroom teachers can spend time in the classroom doing the prep work. We drop off stuff at the school, and that's what they use. They have everything they need. And I also was able to take some screenshots off the videos to teach them and made the directions more visual, and much easier for students to use. So it was a little less frustrating for them on the field trip. So here is an example of what the directions used to look like on the left. Too many words. No one likes to read that many words. And then on the right, how they were simplified with pictures and descriptions and much more simple, easier for them to read.

All right, so during Covid, before we get to any questions, I'm going to stop my screen share so I can see everybody again. We did Project WATER remotely in the field. I had a complete setup. I would stream into the classroom live. The students would watch me do the chemical testing and they could interact. They could see the area that we were in. We did virtual teaching in the classroom. That was pretty popular. And we also did Whitney Water Center in the field, and Whitney Water Center Learning from Home, which was a video series that's up on YouTube if you're interested one night in a little bit of water science. There were three to five minute lessons taking the programs that we did in the classroom and giving it to the teachers that was easy for them to integrate as needed. And that was done in March 2020, before anyone was thinking about virtual teaching and having people in the classroom. All right. Any questions?

Stephen:

Questions for Lisa?

Larry:

I don't have a question, but I just want to offer kudos to Lisa and the work that she has done, particularly translating her educational programs into a video format, because it enabled us to reach out and connect with students, and it was just a terrific job. They're well done-

Lisa:

Thank you.

Larry:

... And as I recall Lisa, I think you said you had little experience in doing that before, but you've become a real pro.

Lisa:

I had made one video prior to the pandemic, and that was trial by fire shall we say. Yes.

Larry:

Yes, great.

Lisa:

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Thank you, Larry. I appreciate that.

Mark:

I was a little late, but that's a great presentation. And I love what you're doing with the invasive species and stuff like that, but the way you outreach, that's one of the things we should be doing as an organization, and I love it.

Lisa:

And I do have some good news. We are on round two of second interviews to hire a new educator.

Mark:

Oh, I love that.

Lisa:

I knew you'd like that, Mark.

Larry:

Terrific. I hadn't heard that.

Mark:

I'm surprised you haven't heard that, you approved it.

Larry:

I know I approved it, but I didn't know where the status was.

Lisa:

So moving along swiftly, I expect by the end of next week we should have an answer on who it's going to be.

Mark:

And I hope you don't go anywhere.

Lisa:

I'm not going anywhere. I'm still doing my teaching there, adding to what I do.

Stephen:

Lisa, this is obviously a very worthwhile program that's been going on for quite a while. Is there a connection between the summer programs you run? Are you able to get students interested in following through on that too?

Lisa:

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So summer programs, we work with libraries. They're a little more casual. We'll advertise. The library sets up a schedule. They advertise, and we'll get different students from the community. Occasionally I'll work with summer schools, and I do have one week long program that I do with Common Ground. It's an environmental career summer camp, where they spend a week, 10 students focusing on careers at the water utility, because everyone here is aware of the retirement bubble that we have looming.

Larry:

Lisa, that was a program that you took over from the Connecticut section as I recall, which used to be called an Environmental Bootcamp back or something like that. And then you took that over and have continued that, as I recall.

Lisa:

Yes. We hosted, it looks like it was 2011. I have the picture up on my wall over here. It was 2011 or 2012. It was a water bootcamp and it was part of the region, and we just happened to be hosting it that year. And I said, Hey, we can do this, and I think we might be able to do it a little better with a different focus. And yeah, that was a while ago, and we're still doing it.

Larry:

That's terrific. Yeah. Good job on that.

Lisa:

Thank you.

Stephen:

Lisa, the Invasion of the Aliens presentation or program, how aware are students, or are they, of invasive species and what's their interests-

Lisa:

It depends on the district-

Stephen:

... In terms of their own future.

Lisa:

Say that again?

Stephen:

Do they understand that in terms of their own future?

Lisa:

Some of them.

Stephen:

Okay.

Lisa:

The Branford students, some of them are very keyed on invasive species because it's part of their integrated language arts curriculum. New Haven students, some of them may have a knowledge of it if it's like a personal interest and they've done a little research. I'm always surprised at how engaged they are in the program. We talk about some local examples of invasive species. We talk about the characteristics of what makes something an invasive species, and then there's an activity where there's some made up plants and animals. We look at their characteristics, and then the students need to look at it analytically and decide, would this be a good invader? Would it not be a good invader? And I think a lot of them leave with, that this is a big deal. I don't know if the age that I'm targeting with it, fourth to fifth is leaving with a big picture of their future. In their world, their future's like the weekend.

Stephen:

No, no. But I mean, at least this is creating a threshold and-

Lisa:

An awareness.

Stephen:

... An awareness, yes-

Lisa:

Absolutely.

Stephen:

... Of what's potentially an issue for them. So it puts it on the radar screen. But yeah, that's good job. I also love what you did with the upgrading of the instructions there. That's a really nice piece.

Lisa:

It was a nice combination of just all the technology, and life came together at the same time. And with the digital teaching now in the classroom, I didn't have a laptop prior to the pandemic. Teachers might have had a SMART board prior to the pandemic. If they had it, most of them are like, there it is. If you know how to use it, you can do something with it. But they didn't have a choice. They needed to learn how to use that SMART board to get through the last two years of their teaching. So it's a little bit of everything that came together in the perfect storm to make a much better presentation.

Stephen:

I wanted to ask you in this vein, you know you've had that building and the resources that you've had for a long time now. Do you think you need more resources to keep this program going or upgrades to the center?

Lisa:

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We just upgraded to new windows at the water center. We're going to be finishing those up very shortly. I did talk with Charles [inaudible 00:21:12] about just little cosmetic maintenance on the inside, especially seeing we haven't been in here using it for the last two years, but resources for teaching, no, I've been properly budgeted where that hasn't been a problem.

Stephen:

When we get going with this dam restoration, is that going to impact what you're able to do there?

Lisa:

No, I don't believe so.

Stephen:

Okay, great. Well, you've really had to adapt and you're to be commended on a great job. I'm just surprised at the other towns. If you were doing this just a short time, you could see why Hamden and New Haven would participate more, because we're closer, but the other towns should know what's happening at this point. So I'm a little bit surprised that you're not getting more, or is it just there are less students in those towns?

Lisa:

Well, it's a couple things. So we've always had a larger participation closer to the epicenter New Haven. The further away we get from New Haven, it's always been lighter participation. We have not sent out an education brochure since 2009. All the teachers that book, book through word of mouth or past experience.

Stephen:

Okay.

Lisa:

I've always had the concern, if we do a large mailing, I could accommodate maybe 10% of the people who call. And that doesn't look good on us to say, oh, I'm really glad you're excited in our programs, but sorry, we're booked. So we hit a threshold where my schedule could manage the teachers that wanted it nicely. So this new educator, their position, the first thing they need to do is, they need to get into the community, to the towns we haven't reached, to the schools we haven't reached and broaden our district. And that's been mentioned in the interviews of, get out there. This is not a hard program to sell at all. It's free, it's engaging, it's science. We come to you. It's perfect.

Mark:

Hear, hear. That sounds wonderful.

Stephen:

Maybe it's in here somewhere, but about what percent of the presentations do you do at the center, and how often do you go out?

Lisa:

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I am out almost every day. I would say less than 5% of the presentations are here at the Whitney Water Center.

The bulk, because they have to pay for busing. They have to do permission slips. Only New Haven and Hamden get free busing in a very short period of time. Just the ease of scheduling. They always lean to that, and that's me in the classroom.

Stephen:

Yeah, I can see that's a big advantage for them. They don't have... You bring it right to them. Great. Terrific. Well, thank you for being with us today. Are there any other questions for Lisa? Okay, great job. Thank you.

Lisa:

Thank you for having me today. Have a good night everyone.

Stephen:

Thank you. Bye-bye.

Stephen:

Item five on the agenda is the report of the OCA. Jeff.

Jeff:

Thank you. Well, as you can tell from my invoice for February, most of my time in February was spent on the issuance test rate application, writing my memo to the RPB, preparing for and attending the RPB public meeting that was held on February 23rd. I did have a meeting with Larry, Rochelle and Dennis earlier this month where I was briefed on potential non-core opportunity that I think at some point will likely be the subject of an application. Can't really go into any more detail about that at this point. But other than that, no consumer escalations, no consumer complaints outstanding.

Stephen:

That's great.

Jeff:

Bit quiet on that front.

Stephen:

All right, thank you. Okay, so we can move on to your approval of your invoice for February. Do I have a motion?

Tony:

[inaudible 00:25:33] We pay it, Steve.

Stephen:

Okay. Second? You don't have a second on that motion?

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Naomi:
Second.

Stephen:
Thank you Naomi.

Stephen:
Any questions for Jeff on the invoice? All those in favor? Aye.

Committee:
Aye.

Stephen:
Any opposed? Any abstentions? Okay, Jennifer that motion carries. Our next meeting is Monday, April 17th. It's going to be a joint meeting with Finance to go over the FY '24 proposed budgets. It's our regular meeting, and they'll join us. So can't believe when we were planning this, it seemed so far in the future, and here we are. It's a heartbeat. Item eight is new business. Does anyone have any new business?

Mario:
Steve, this is Mario. Just one point. The meeting in April is actually at five o'clock, so if you're used to the 5:30 starts for Consumer Affairs, it's at five instead of 5:30. So make sure you all make a note on that.

Stephen:
Yes. Thanks for pointing that out Mario.

Mario:
Otherwise it'll be a real slow start to the meeting.

Stephen:
Yes, no, we're going to start it a little earlier, the content. So yeah, good to make everyone aware of that. Maybe Jennifer, in a reminder you could email and point that out too.

Jennifer:
Yes, I'll send that out.

Mario:
And then just, I know that recently in the papers there was an application about a year ago or so that Eversource/Aquarion had submitted to PURA about their rates and that got denied. And there's a difference between the two boards that... I mean PURA has certain responsibilities as they review rate cases, and the RPB has different responsibilities. And one's a private entity, one is a public entity. So I just want to make sure if there were any questions? Jeff and I touched base on this. Two very different

types of applications for rate adjustment. So in case there were anyone that had any questions on the consumer affairs related to that?

Stephen:

Mario, is there any critical difference that you see? I mean, basically we're doing the same thing. Do they have other tools? Is that the difference, or do they have maybe authority to do some things we don't?

Mario:

Well, PURA is looking at private entities and their profits go to the stockholders, to the shareholders. If we have extra profits, so to speak, which is the funding. We don't spend money during the year. That goes back into our infrastructure. PURA... we have an issuance rate test that we just went through, and we had the public hearing and all. And the whole structure is to meet the criteria that is required as far as a rate goes, to meet the proposed budget, dealing with the capital essentially. I mean, the capital is the biggest one. So we have to meet our costs, right? That's a basic requirement. We have to meet our costs. We don't have a profit, so we have to budget appropriately so we meet the costs.

The RPB then is supposed to look at that and the OCA looks at it, is it reasonable or not? And we look at it, and we have an up or down vote. Whereas PURA has different tools that I don't think is really appropriate for the RPB. We don't have that authority, but I don't think it's appropriate necessarily. So there are quite a few differences. And one of the things that we get that PURA doesn't get is... And really finance gets every year in the Fall... Rochelle's been doing a great job of projecting the 10-year model. You've heard talk of it. I know the full RPB has seen it from time to time, and you certainly see it with the budget.

And that's a real good time as a board in the finance committee if you're interested, to look at what is being proposed in the long term, and to ask some of the questions of, wow, is this really the right direction? Are we bunching up a bunch of projects that is driving capital up in a given year? Should it be spread out? Should it be accelerated? Oh, this is lead and copper that came out of left field as a large cost, and what's being done to allow that to be part of the rates case? So it's really important. I encourage you when you see on the agendas, everyone should be getting the agenda for each meeting. You see the 10-year model being presented to attend the finance committee meeting that day, because it really is a good time to sit through it, and ask the questions as the Finance Committee usually does that.

Stephen:

Yeah. There are multiple opportunities for looking at that too. That's interesting. Yeah. I mean they have investors. However, it is the mission of the water authority to provide the water at a reasonable rate, so that it will operate it from an efficient financial position so that the cost of that... like you say, the better you run it, and if money goes into maintaining the facility. Do you think they have specific obligations with regard to the investors?

Mario:

Absolutely. Yes.

Stephen:

I mean investors-

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Jeff:

Absolutely. As a matter of law.

Stephen:

... Don't they lose or gain? So who determines what that's going to be?

Jeff:

Well, the United States Supreme Court about a hundred years ago, without exaggeration, established precedent that's been adopted by the Connecticut Supreme Court. And that precedent says that regulated utility is entitled to an opportunity to recover prudent operating expenses as well as capital costs, including a fair and reasonable rate of return on capital investments. And the Supreme Court decisions in Connecticut had said that rate setting requires a balancing of the investor and consumer interests.

So a big part of what PURA does when they're adjudicating a docket for a utility that they regulate, is determine what a reasonable return on equity should be. So in the case that Mario's talking about, Aquarion was looking for about a 10 and a half percent return on equity, and PURA decided that something just north of eight and a half percent was appropriated. So there's a lot of focus on what an appropriate rate of return on equity should be. The jurisdiction that PURA has with respect to the process and putting conditions of approval in place. It's just very dramatically different than an issuance test rate application. And the legislative authority that the RPB has per the enabling legislation of the RWA.

Naomi:

And I'll just add from the filer's perspective, the whole approach that a private company, given past the experience that I have, it's very different in how you submit those applications versus what we do here at RWA.

Jeff:

Right. You would have expert witnesses on what the correct rate of return would be. Right? I mean that's a big part of it.

Larry:

That's a big part of it. And that lever really does have a significant impact on what the rates end up being, and plus it's retrospective Steve. PURA is looking at the investment that the utilities made over the past years since they filed their last rate case. It's been nine years since Aquarion was in for their last rate case. So they were trying to recover nine years' worth of investment in infrastructure. Whereas ours is prospective, because you all get to look at the capital budget and then we finance what we need to when we don't have enough of the internally generated funds, in order to pay for that infrastructure. So it's a vastly different model.

Stephen:

Yeah. But those investors aren't like an investor totally in another private company. They sort of have a guaranteed rate of return I guess, by the way-

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Larry:

No, they don't. Just because PURA says that a company's allowed to earn 9% return on equity, that may or may not be provided based on operational issues or a lot of factors out of their control.

Stephen:

No, but they get something, right? They may not get the full amount. They can't lose because PURA is considering a return on investment.

Larry:

So they can go back. Go ahead Jeff.

Jeff:

Thanks. Actually, the outcome of that docket, I consider that a loss because their rate essentially got reduced.

Larry:

That's right.

Jeff:

I mean the net effect is a loss of \$67 a year per customer or something like that. So considering the amount of money they spent, I mean it's necessary, but I consider it to be a loss.

Stephen:

Oh, okay. Do we have something similar in a way, because we issue bonds, right? And we pay out. So investors come into the way we're structured. Making money in that regard, that's how we raise capital and get some investment.

Larry:

Well, we issue bonds and we provide a guaranteed interest rate on that. Your private and your investor owned utilities, they issue stock. People buy that stock and they pay a dividend on it, which they can either raise or lower depending on how their financial situation is. Whereas we pay a fixed rate of return on those bonds. So even in that case, it's different.

Stephen:

Yes. Okay.

Naomi:

And we don't have any equity there. So it is a different model.

Stephen:

Interesting. Any questions for Mario or Jeff? Well thanks for bringing it up Mario. Appreciate it. Any other new business? Okay, I'll call for a motion to adjourn then.

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Frank:

I'll second it.

Stephen:

Thank you. All those in favor?

Committee:

Aye.