

Water board should be investigated

By Carroll Cox

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Jun 16, 2013



HONOLULU STAR-ADVERTISER

Honolulu Board of Water Supply employees worked at shutting off a valve to a broken 12-inch water main in Waikiki in March 2011.

I am amazed that the Honolulu Board of Water Supply is so evasive about justifying its management of our drinking water, resources and rate charges.

This organization's leaders have historically hidden behind the board's "semi-autonomous" status to tell us only what they want to feed the public, and therefore what the media will report ("Monthly water bills needed for upgrades," Star-Advertiser, Island Voices, June 9).

They admit the system was not properly maintained in the past. Now they want to justify bad management by again jacking up rates, even while acknowledging a deceptive "service charge" escalation.

But the story is only half told.

A lawsuit was filed about five years ago because a major component of the "AMR" (automatic meter reading) system — the plastic reader attached atop the meter — was failing. The board's response was a pennies-on-the-dollar settlement that got the vendor off the hook at the expense of valuable revenues that could and should have been used to upgrade the system. Needed revenues were lost then, and continue to be lost now.

We then found out that the batteries powering the remote transmission of data and the were failing earlier than expected — board wants \$1.5 million annually just to change them. For \$1.5

million, the board could rehire the 20 meter readers it laid off and customers would get monthly "real reads," actual meter box inspections and batteries changed.

Is the board making money off of customers because it is not checking for leaks in hardware it is responsible for?

The AMR system cost \$30 million, and was supposed to save money. Instead, board managers received pats on the back in the form of bonuses and the abhorrent practice of rehiring individuals after retirement (double-dipping) as further "rewards."

We have a right to know how much of an ongoing blunder the meter system continues to be. Only a fraction of the 150,000 meters over the last 10 years have been inspected. Batteries have gone dead. What else, and for how long?

The board is routinely "computer estimating" for questionable revenue purposes, and the new customer care and billing software has uncovered potentially even greater abuse. It raises concerns about how many ratepayers have been unfairly or improperly "computer estimated." The board has refused to furnish the data for basic questions asked by me under the Uniform Information Practices Act. All I have received is incomplete information, delays and refusals.

We are calling for an independent federal investigation and audit to answer the following:

- » How many households have been "computer estimated" over the last 10 years? How many of those have gone on for longer than 30 days, 60 days, or longer?
- » Will the board retroactively adjust computer-estimated water bills found to be inaccurate?
- » Why are public concerns being ducked and staffing inadequate at customer service?
- » Other areas of concern include double-dipping, bonuses, conflicts of interest and worker abuse. Who is profiting from this bad management?

If the water board is grabbing customer money improperly to balance the books or pay perks to the people perpetuating this farce, this needs to be exposed.

Its workers speak to me with great pride in the organization they created years ago. They are proud people who do difficult and complicated work, and helped build a quality organization by having integrity. Irate customers and water main breaks are all in a day's work.

But now, some workers have been embarrassed by bad decisions, whether it is deceptive "service charges" or inflated "computer estimates" of water use. Enough is enough. An independent investigation of the board is needed to address the anger festering within the community and to determine the ethics, policies and practices at the board.

This will only get worse without a complete airing of the facts so that our public may respond.



*Carroll Cox
is an environ-
mentalist,
consumer and
civil rights
advocate; he
hosts "The
Carroll Cox
Show" Sundays
on radio KWAJ
1080 AM.*
