

Environmental Services Customer Focus Groups

Executive Summary*

**Excerpted from full report by DHM Research*

Project Goals:

- Gain a better understanding of the public's awareness and perceptions of BES.
- Gather insights to inform BES priorities (i.e. what issues matter most to customers).
- Learn what communication tools are best for engaging ratepayers (e.g. print, social media, website).

Research Methodology:

Five focus groups were held in April and May, 2017, in Portland, organized and facilitated by DHM Research. In total, 54 people participated in the groups, which were divided by geographic area. The groups represented North/Northeast Portland, Southeast Portland, East Portland, Southwest Portland, and Northwest Portland. Participants were recruited from a list of registered voters. Efforts were made to ensure diversity by gender, age, income, political party, and ethnicity. The participants included both homeowners and renters.

Research Results – Key Findings:

- Portlanders value access to green space and natural areas in their backyards, and they believe protecting these areas should be a top priority.
- Most participants have low awareness of how waterways and natural areas are managed, but they believe a mix of agencies—local, state, and federal—work together to manage them.
- BES flies under most participants' radars, but upon learning of the agency, they hope for transparency, accountability, and cost containment.
- BES has an opportunity to build its brand from scratch and to educate residents about watershed restoration and public health.

Recommendations and Next Steps

- 1. BES should assume low awareness of its programs and services when communicating with the public and differentiate itself from drinking water.**

Although some participants were more knowledgeable than others, most didn't have a strong grasp of water resources management. Participants were somewhat more knowledgeable about watershed health and restoration, relying on commonsense measures, such as what wildlife they see and whether the water contains debris.

Awareness of the relationship between drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater is low. Even with repeated remarks from the moderator to the contrary, participants rated the water quality of local rivers and streams based on their perceptions of drinking water. They also linked to drinking water BES's stated goal to protect public health, pointing to boil notices and lead pipes in Portland schools.

To combat these misconceptions, residents will need repeated reminders that BES does not provide drinking water. To increase public awareness of the relationship between different types of water management, it may be beneficial to also:

- Educate residents about the sources of their drinking water.
- Partner with community organizations and university experts to deliver these messages, which can reduce the skepticism with which many residents view governments and environmental groups.

2. BES can decide when and how to raise awareness of its services—and when to enjoy a low profile.

Low awareness isn't always a bad thing, as a few participants noted. Several commented throughout the discussions that they appreciated that there isn't much news about BES, meaning there aren't significant problems with the sewer system, threats to public health, or other negative impacts. Two participants wondered if it is necessary for residents to know about BES at all.

Many participants who had a stronger understanding of environmental issues felt more positively about the value of BES's services and programs. This is true across sectors: informed residents are typically more positive, because they better understand the challenges and trade-offs a service provider faces. The Southwest participants were the most informed about watershed health and stormwater management and were also among the most positive.

There may be times when BES will want to highlight its positive impact in the community and other times when it would prefer to retain its low profile. When BES chooses to highlight its impact, it should:

- Focus on outcomes and use a positive tone. Such a tactic will speak more directly to residents' priorities and values about natural spaces and clean water than will merely rebutting negative perceptions.
- Emphasizing positive outcomes related to fish and wildlife, connections to nature, and access to recreation will connect deeply with residents.

3. Simple communications, such as images, brief statistics, and short stories will help residents contextualize the agency.

Given the low awareness of these issues in the community, most residents aren't ready for in-depth communications about the services and programs BES provides. Participants struggled to visualize BES as a bureau or a concept; one participant asked if it was a building, or a site, or a pipe.

Both the focus groups and other research show that Oregonians respond positively to messages and imagery that relate to their values about nature and the outdoors, including:

- Images of trees, rivers, fish, and wildlife
- Stories of BES's impact that are connected to residents' communities and quality of life
- Simple data points that show changes over time and comparisons to peer cities

Other research shows that strong messages will avoid certain words, phrases, and issues including *wastewater*, *stormwater*, *sustainability*, *livability*, and *infrastructure*. These technical terms are complicated, less connected to resident values, and tend to raise more questions than they answer.

4. Informed residents and community organizations may serve as a useful network of trusted messengers who can help combat misconceptions about water quality.

Participants' comments confirmed that community lore about water quality has a significant impact on residents' perceptions. Long-time residents spoke of the conventional wisdom that it is not safe to swim in the Willamette or eat fish from it. Newer residents were less attuned to these beliefs, and indicated that they based their perceptions in part on the fact that they see others recreating in the water.

To combat negative misconceptions about water quality:

- Partner with community organizations involved in outdoor recreation to encourage more residents to interact with waterways and natural areas.
- Continue to work in partnership with existing programs, like farmers' markets and Sunday Parkways, to reach residents who prioritize outdoor recreation, healthy wildlife habitat, and access to natural spaces.

Even residents who don't recreate on the river themselves will draw conclusions about water quality after seeing increased activity on the water. Each of these venues will provide ample opportunity to discuss positive outcomes with residents, who can in turn serve as community messengers.

5. Quantitative research can help develop metrics to track over time and provide insight into most effective messages for particular residents.

BES may consider using its questions in the annual auditor's survey to track perceptions of water quality or awareness of the bureau, as tracking questions work best when they are repeated once every year to once every three years.

The feedback from the focus groups and other research provides valuable guidance on the best types of messages, outcomes, and data to highlight in future communications. To determine, with greater specificity, which messages are most effective for certain demographic groups, BES may consider additional quantitative research that tests messages about recent positive outcomes.