

The Oregonian

Portland boil water alert: City emergency managers had 3 options to alert 670,000 people, here's why

By Andrew Theen

Portland leaders held a news conference at noon Friday urging 670,000 metro area residents to boil their drinking water due to the presence of suspected fecal matter. Nearly five hours later, the city finished alerting residents through its onerous emergency alert system.

Hours before the FirstCall notification system ran its course, social media already did the city's work, spreading the news of the water boil alert with a hashtag, memes, and pictures of barren shelves at local grocery stores as if bottled water caches vanished out of thin air.

City officials had two other options that would have been much faster, but less targeted at households actually served by Portland drinking water.

Why didn't they use these alternatives? Because the city knew that news and social media would get the word out and officials didn't want to alarm people who didn't need to boil their water.

The incident illustrates the balancing act emergency managers must perform in deciding the level of response to deploy against a public health threat.

Carmen Merlo, director of Portland's Bureau of Emergency Management, said it's not unrealistic for Portlanders to want timely notifications of important events.

But, Merlo said, "unless you're sitting in a cave," Friday's alert likely reached residents sooner than the four-and-a-half hours it took to dial the 461,000 numbers, send 4,000 text messages and email 7,000 customers.

When incidents such as Friday's E. coli scare strike, the city has three specific tools to alert residents.

It can: blanket cell phone users across Multnomah County with a 90-character emergency alert on their phones; enable an emergency alert across radio and television sets; or reverse 911, which sends recorded messages to telephone landlines and some mobile phone users.

The wireless option, used during early February's massive snowstorm, takes far less time than the reverse 911 system. Dan Douthit, spokesman for the emergency management bureau, said the wireless alert generally takes 10 to 15 minutes to both compose a message and reach everyone via a cellular tower across the county.

But Merlo said officials were concerned that such an alert would create more panic or concern than Friday's event warranted. Water Bureau officials opted not to deploy the wireless message because it would've reached some 200,000 residents who were not affected by the boil warning.

The wireless option reaches people who are traveling through the county, too, making it both helpful but less precise. The cell towers can often bleed over into adjacent counties.

City officials decided that in this instance, the problems with such an approach outweighed the benefits. Commissioner Steve Novick, who oversees PBEM, said Friday's boil warning was deemed to be less dangerous than the February snowstorm. Novick said Friday's message was purely cautionary.

A second option on Portland emergency managers' menu: the emergency alerts transmitted via television and radio broadcasts. Those messages (think the Amber Alerts transmitted for a missing child) interrupt television and radio shows with beeping tones and then tell viewers of a pending emergency. The Bureau of Emergency Communications activates the broadcast alert, but the National Weather Service and President Obama can do so, too.

Douthit said the city has a list of four criteria that an event must meet before enabling the TV and radio messages: The danger is imminent; the situation is life threatening; the public needs instructions on what to do; and other warning methods would be ineffective.

Friday's boil warning didn't meet the first and fourth criteria, Douthit said: The threat wasn't imminent, and other methods of notification would be effective.

Douthit said Portland would use all of the tools at its disposal in the event of an earthquake or other large-scale tragedy.

This case didn't merit the fullest and fastest response possible, officials decided, so they went with reverse 911. And FirstCall, the contractor whose software dials all landlines throughout the city, did its job, according to Merlo.

"Shows like CSI give people the impression that we're so advanced," Merlo said Tuesday.

But, she said, no alternative program exists for reaching every landline customer in Portland.

"If there was a piece of technology that could do it for us today," Merlo said, "we want it, and we would go out there and buy it."

Douthit, the PBEM spokesman, said the city is limited by the landline telephone system's physical capacity. It simply takes a long time to call all those numbers.

Merlo and others have spoken publicly about issues with FirstCall. The proposed budget set for City Council approval on Wednesday includes \$100,000 in new general fund dollars to pay for an emergency alert system.

The city hasn't gone out to bid for a replacement company and likely won't have a new contractor for months.

"Realistically," Douthit said, "we may need to extend our current contract."

In the meantime, the city continues to push Oregonians to sign up for alerts through the public alerts website.

"In a perfect world everyone would have their cell phone registered," Douthit said.

People who opt into the alert system would've received a call on their cell phone or an email on Friday.

Douthit said one silver lining from Friday's incident: the city saw 2,500 new users register for the system.

That's the largest increase in one weekend since the program began in 2010. There are a little more than 20,000 people currently signed up for the public alerts system.

Looking back at Portland's largest ever boil water alert: Portland City Hall Roundup

By Andrew Theen

We're plugging back in after a busy Memorial Day weekend.

That was exciting an exciting news week: A historic same sex marriage ruling, election night, more details on a proposed street fee in Portland, and another national story out of Portland's Mt. Tabor reservoirs.

A city-wide boil water notice capped off what was a jam-packed news week on Friday.

City officials instructed some 670,000 metro area residents to boil their tap water before drinking, brushing teeth or making coffee. The positive tests for E. coli and the presence of fecal matter occurred early last week.

The alert lasted just 24 hours, but the news on Friday spread through social media, temporarily crashing the city's water alert website and leading to a run on bottled water throughout the city.

Over the weekend, city water administrator David Shaff told OPB it's possible the city may never know the cause of the fecal matter. The hunch, though, it's likely from an animal.

In case you missed it over the weekend, Lynne Terry reported that the E. coli strains were not associated with more severe food poisoning outbreaks.

There are many strains of E. coli and most are not harmful to humans. But some, associated with food outbreaks, can be deadly. The Portland Water Bureau retested the same samples for virulent strains, and the tests were negative...

The boil water alert was lifted on Saturday when tests on more than a dozen sources were negative for both total coliform and E. coli.

The water bureau is now working on getting Reservoir 1 and 5 back online....officials have emptied Reservoir 1 and hosed it down. They plan to spray the floor and the walls with a high concentration of chlorine on Tuesday to kill pathogens, then partially refill it and test again for bacteria. The water bureau hopes to have the reservoir back online by Wednesday.

We'll have more updates on the boil alert this week.

Look on the bright side, if you're one of the many Portlanders that stocked up on bottled water, consider yourself prepared for the event that a real disaster hits.

Portland street fee: Business alliance asks members to testify, Venture Portland calls fee 'punch to gut'

By Andrew Theen

For weeks, Sandra McDonough, the Portland Business Alliance's president, has asked city leaders to slow down plans for a proposed street fee to pay for maintenance and safety projects.

On Tuesday, the head of Portland's chamber of commerce reiterated the request through an email blast to the group's 1,700 local businesses, urging business owners to show up on Thursday for the first City Council hearing on the street fee.

A PBA spokeswoman said the email blast is a casting call, not a formal stance on the proposed street fee.

Last week, Mayor Charlie Hales and Commissioner Steve Novick formally revealed a more detailed proposal for a street fee on residents and businesses that could raise roughly \$40 million to \$50 million a year.

Winning the support of local business groups is a key component in passing the street fee, which Hales and Novick have said should be enacted by City Council rather than referring to the ballot for voter approval.

"Portland City Council needs to hear from Portland businesses that the process is moving too fast and there are a number of issues that need to be addressed before the business community can consider yet another fee," the email said.

Venture Portland, another local business alliance, is also concerned about how quickly the fee is moving from idea to an expected final City Council vote in June.

"This is moving too fast for comfort," said Brian Alfano, president of Venture Portland's board. His board hasn't had time to have a full conversation about the proposed fee, Alfano said.

The fee equates to \$11.56 a month for Portland homeowners, or almost \$139 a year.

Poorer households would pay \$8.09 a month, while owners of apartment complexes would be charged \$6.79 a month per unit, with another discount for multifamily complexes that cater to lower-income residents. The fee applies to city agencies and schools, too.

But the cost to business owners would vary widely depending on the number of trips generated to a particular business and its square footage.

Alfano, the vice president of member services at Unitus Community Credit Union said the proposed fee is "a punch to the gut" for small businesses. He said business owners are still recovering from the recession and costs associated with the recently passed sick leave ordinance in Portland, which grants all employees earned sick time for illness, injury or preventative care.

The Portland Bureau of Transportation posted an online calculator last week for businesses to figure out estimated monthly costs under the current proposal.

Alfano said he couldn't determine what Unitus would owe the city under the current estimates. "I don't want to charge my members more fees to pay for a fee that's being created by the city," Alfano said.

He expects businesses will absorb the costs and pass on added expenses to customers.

Alfano said he expects the Venture Portland board to meet in early June to discuss the fee, but he also anticipates a big turnout Thursday and a strong response if the council moves forward.

"We should push for this to go on the ballot," Alfano said.

The City Council meets Thursday at 2 p.m. at Portland City Hall.

A sudden transportation fee and voter shut-out: Editorial Agenda 2014

By The Oregonian Editorial Board

The news that many of Portland's roads, sidewalks and intersections are in need of repair or overhaul is not new. The city's auditor more than a year ago issued a report that detailed costly neglect by the city of sufficient maintenance to Portland's more than 5,000 miles of roads – a laxity so egregious it would take about \$70 million a year now and going forward just to bring things up to snuff.

What is new is the solution announced last week. City Commissioner Steve Novick and Mayor Charlie Hales effectively told residents and business owners they'd be told to pay up so that the city can get on with the core responsibility of maintaining its transportation infrastructure. At least that's the idea: The council will this week be asked to consider adopting a monthly transportation maintenance fee, indexed to road use and possibly attaching it to the quarterly water and sewer bills received by home- and business-owning Portlanders.

The answer, for now, should be no: twice. That is not to say a street maintenance fee won't be the answer – it likely will, and correctly. But not in this way. The ask is so great – a fee generating up to \$50 million a year beyond already high taxes and utility charges – that voters should determine whether City Hall should get the money and proceed or reexamine priorities and function on less revenue. A transportation

fee arguably acts as a tax to those paying it, despite its alignment with facility use, and those paying should have the final say.

Novick and Hales are correct in identifying the urgency of the need. Waiting to step up repaving and sidewalk installation will only make things more expensive and risky, particularly around schools. Novick talks about streets as teeth: If you don't brush and floss regularly, decay and problems run deep quickly. But that's no reason to brand a tax a fee and treat it as such an emergency it can't wait for full public discussion. As Sandra McDonough, president of the Portland Business Alliance told The Oregonian's editorial board: "We're still really concerned about how fast this is moving.... At some point, this will have to be vetted by the public."

Novick, whose wit runs deep quickly, told reporters in his announcement Thursday he regretted the precipitous action but that necessity issued upon him and Hales a call for decisive leadership. "None of us want to be doing this," he said. "If the voters are really mad at us, we're both up for reelection in 2016, and they can throw us out."

Siri to Novick: Curves ahead. No guardrail. Proceed with caution.

Portlanders and Portland business owners are reasonable people. It is not lost on any of us that the basic functions of the city depend up on safe and timely mobility – that goes for kids walking to school just as it goes for trucks making deliveries just as it goes for shoppers navigating clotted streets. Neither is it lost on Portlanders that somebody must pay to make it work, and surely all of us will.

But first voters need the confidence City Hall will get it right. Novick's plan comes on the heels of the water and sewer bureaus having to fight for their lives owing to questionable spending. And his announcement found competition on the same day from Commissioner Amanda Fritz, who disclosed that her staff was conducting polling to see if Portlanders would support a bond renewal this year for \$68 million in parks repairs. If tone-deafness could be metered, City Hall would have a new revenue stream.

Novick oversaw polling this year in which respondents showed tepid support for new ways to pay for street maintenance. The use fee being proposed, Novick told the editorial board, "was the least unpopular, with about 50 percent support," and so it became the immediate solution to a seemingly forever problem. As of last week, Novick could count himself, Hales and possibly Fritz as the three votes to support the fee. Commissioner Nick Fish previously told the editorial board he supports a vote by the public on it, and last week he stated his opposition to attaching any transportation fee to bills sent out by the water and sewer bureaus, which he oversees. Commissioner Dan Saltzman, meanwhile, has openly wondered whether the Bureau of Transportation's spending priorities are such that a fee of the level being proposed is defensible.

Gary Sargent runs a motorsports business on Southeast Foster Road and serves as vice president of the 82nd Avenue of Roses Business Association. He attended a session at which Novick and Hales presented the fee idea. He acknowledges the need for road maintenance but worries about whether the city or state claims upkeep responsibility for Southeast 82nd Avenue, the heart of his commercial area, and whether he'd see improvements for his fee dollars. Mainly, though, he remains piqued: "The bottom line is that there's no process, we're just told," he told the editorial board. "You know, I'm getting tired of seeing vacant storefronts."

The transportation fee could reach about \$140 annually for households but potentially thousands of dollars for some larger businesses and public facilities, depending on vehicular trips associated with individual sites. It or something like it might well be necessary. But public discussion needs to deepen and the public, not City Hall, needs to decide.

The Daily Journal of Commerce

Cracks slow Powell Butte reservoir construction

By Jeff McDonald

The Portland Water Bureau says the \$138 million project to build a new Powell Butte reservoir is on budget and will be done on time, despite the discovery of approximately 3,200 cracks.

"This is a large concrete structure," said Tim Hall, public information officer for the city. "Consequently, there were (more) cracks ... than expected."

Corona, Calif.-based SSC Construction is the general contractor for the project. Divers found the cracks when the reservoir was filled. Crews then began filling the cracks with an epoxy grout sealant.

The project's design budget previously increased from \$8.5 million to \$12.3 million, following various land use, permitting and construction management issues, according to the bureau. The construction budget has increased from \$80 million to \$82.2 million because of additions, Hall said. Other costs include construction of a permanent caretaker's house, a maintenance facility for Portland Parks & Recreation and an interpretive center, he said. Additional change orders could drive up the price higher, he said.

"We believe that the project is going to come in under budget," he said. "Our expectation is that they will submit the project according to their bid."

SSC Construction is about two months behind schedule, but the 50-million-gallon reservoir is expected to be ready for service by late summer, Hall said. That will allow the city to disconnect the Mount Tabor reservoir and transfer water into the Powell Butte one before a December 2015 deadline.

Installation of a large underground pipe and valve vault began at Southeast 162nd Avenue and Division Street last week. Work will wrap up by September, according to the bureau.

A 25-million-gallon reservoir at Kelly Butte, meanwhile, is ready to go online by next year, according to Hall. Hoffman Construction is building the \$90 million Kelly Butte reservoir.

"We have to have the two reservoirs ready to go to replace the storage needs that we currently have at Mount Tabor," he said. "Storage from (Portland's) east side will come from Powell Butte and Kelly Butte."

The Portland Business Journal

Street fees, Google Fiber are top of mind for Portland's City Council this week

By Andy Giegerich

It's a short, but very active, week for Portland's City Council.

At the first of two meetings this week (on Wednesday), the council will begin examining the proposed 2014-15 budget, submitted by Portland Mayor Charlie Hales. The Council will also analyze the proposed Portland Development Commission budget.

The budgets must be in place by July 1.

At 11:15, the Council will vote whether to authorize a “network hut license agreement” with Google Fiber Oregon LLC. Google is considering bringing its high-speed network to Portland and several other cities.

Then, the Council will consider whether to revise residential solid waste and recycling collection rates and charges. The new rates would take effect July 1.

Finally, the Council’s chambers could be packed on Thursday as commissioners pore over proposals to create new transportation user fees. Some businesses are objecting to the proposal, which would fund road repair and other infrastructure needs.

The discussion, which will also include talk about a ballot measure that actually earmarks the new fees for road repairs, starts at 2 p.m.

Portland Business Alliance calls for a deep breath on street fees

By Andy Giegerich

The Portland Business Alliance is mobilizing its members in opposition of a proposed city transportation user fee.

“The proposal has the potential to be burdensome on many businesses,” the city’s largest business advocacy group wrote in a letter to members.

As such, the Alliance is urging Portland Mayor Charlie Hales and Commissioner Steve Novick “to slow down the process to allow time for additional public input as the details of this complex proposal have only recently been made available.”

The measure will be the subject of a public hearing tomorrow at Portland’s City Hall. The Alliance is urging members to testify on the matter at the hearing, which starts at 2 p.m.

“Portland City Council needs to hear from Portland businesses that the process is moving too fast and there are a number of issues that need to be addressed before the business community can consider yet another fee,” the group wrote.

The fees would back road repairs and improvements. The city said 60 percent of businesses would pay about \$75 a month.