

Councilmember Questions re Jan 2025 DPU Water Emergency

The following questions reflect both broad topics and specific questions that Councilmembers hope will be addressed in the upcoming third-party investigation of last week's water emergency. We look forward to reviewing them together at the next Government Operations Standing Committee meeting.

Preparedness

- What redundancies do we have and how often do we test them?
- What does emergency preparedness training for DPU Water Treatment Plant staff look like?
- Any understanding of pre water loss emergency plans for water failure? (EPA report states the Fire Department had managed safety drills?)
- Prior to the incident, describe DPU's preventive maintenance policies and investments. For example, were electronic water meters maintained on a regular basis? If so, how?
- Does DPU do disaster planning? If so, when was their last tabletop scenario exercise?
- What vacancies currently exist in the department, how long have the positions been vacant for, and how did vacancies impact the department's ability to respond during this crisis?

Initial Event and Immediate Response

- Provide a detailed timeline of the incident and immediate response.
- Who was on call following the Governor's emergency declaration on Friday, January 3rd, including at the Water Treatment Plant?
- How many workers were physically in the plant the day of the pump breaking?
- Why did it take multiple hours to get an electrician to the WTP, and what was the timeline from alerting electrician to getting them on site?
- Do department protocols require having an electrician on-site? If so, why did an electrician have to be called in?
- Describe the role of Dominion in this outage. Why did the plant electrician manually switch the plant to the secondary Dominion power source rather than the backup generator?
- At the time of the initial unreported water outage, and then later during the known water shortage, what was the potential (at the time) health impact of drinking the tap water? (some have asked this from a public health standpoint of watching for symptoms or preparing health system for mass illness).
- Does this crisis increase potential exposure to lead in our water due to lead pipes?
- Why did some parts of the city lose water completely, some lost only partially, and others did not lose water service at all. I had a lot of constituents in the far western part of my district that never lost service, but they weren't sure if they should still boil.
- Why did the department not have a clear understanding of how long the reserves would last before residents would see a drop in water pressure?
- An anonymous hospital executive said they were warned by the city 3 days prior to the outage that this was a planned repair on the pump on the James and the pump needed to be dry before the repairs could be done. Can this be substantiated and how did this impact the outage?
- Did the city use its 2017 Emergency Response Plan (referenced in the 2022 EPA inspection report), and if not, why not? Can we see a copy of the current Emergency Response Plan?

- What materials were purchased or leased to address the issue, how much did they cost, and what was the budget to cover the expense?

Communication with the Public

- Do we have an SMS alerting system available for major updates and alerts? What is the protocol for when we use this system?
- Residents reported getting texts from DPU during the emergency reminding them to pay their bill. Couldn't we have used that system to push out alerts about boil water advisory?
- What improvements will be made to ensure timely and consistent updates are provided to residents, particularly for those without access to digital platforms? Additionally, what improvements will be made to the city website? As I've previously stated to DIT and relevant agencies, the city website is outdated and hard to navigate.
- Could we develop a proactive communication plan, including pre-drafted emergency messages for various scenarios, to avoid delays in sharing information?
- Can RVA311's capacity be expanded to handle high volumes of calls during emergencies? What additional tools (e.g., online forms, live updates) could be added?
- How will the City engage community leaders and organizations to help disseminate information in emergencies, especially to vulnerable populations?
- Frustration with no return phone call from city workers, especially for residents who didn't know the city was closed.
- Should we have a unified City Council newsletter to help ensure that critical information reached all residents equitably regardless of their district?
- How can we ensure that City Councilmembers are more proactively communicated with by administration so that we can also be first to share information. In many cases my constituents knew about an update from social media before I got an email from the proper channels.

Water Distribution

- How did the city decide locations for water distribution?
- Will there be a review of which sites ran out of water and which sites had extras?
- How can we prepare for future emergencies with plans for water deliveries to help residents who cannot make it to water distribution sites?

Relief for Residents & Businesses

- How will we support residents or businesses who lost wages because of the water emergency?
- Outline the rental and eviction assistance available for families.
- How are we adjusting due dates for taxes and fees due to the city last week?
- How much can we estimate that this incident has cost the city, in terms of: expended city funds, forgone city services, foregone student learning, and foregone economic activity?

After-Action Investigation and Future Reforms

- How are we analyzing the crisis? Who is leading it? What is the timeline? What immediate corrective actions have already been put in place to respond?
- Why did DPU only respond to EPA October 2022 report last week? Why did the city spokesperson say that we didn't receive the findings from the EPA until August of 2024 when news reports indicate that wasn't the case?
- Lot of discussion about regional management going forward. Is that on the table?
- Is it correct that we issued requests for proposals three times before finally contracting with a company to repair a part [switchgear] at the Water Treatment Plant? If so, why the delays?
- What steps will be taken to ensure better internal coordination among the Mayor's Office, DPU, Councilmembers, and liaisons during future crises?
- Will there be training for city staff, Councilmembers, and liaisons to ensure we are prepared to handle future emergencies effectively?
- What is the toll on the system when we sell water to surrounding counties? Is their usage and payments actually accounting for the additional stress/use it puts on our infrastructure?
- Over the last 5 and 10 years, how much maintenance/updates dollars were put into the water treatment building/equipment?
- Please publish the most recent maintenance records related to the water treatment plant. Were all of the pumps fully operational prior to the crisis? How old are all of our pumps and what are the maintenance costs for each of them?
- Please publish maintenance records related to the plant IT system
- Did we use or request any federal funding (ARPA, IRA, etc.) to invest in our water treatment plant and its related IT systems?
- What is the annual revenue produced by the DPU Utility PILOT enterprise back to FY2018?
- Provide data on city expenditures by FTE count of staff, operational expenses, and material expenses. Please include the general fund budget and CIP budget during this timeframe.
- Share an update on all outstanding capital improvement projects at the Water Treatment Plant.
- What is the role of the Public Utilities and Services Commission (PUSC) in reaction to this emergency?
- Why were there vacancies on the Public Utility Commission for so long?
- Has our inspector general and auditor received tips or completed any reports related to the water treatment plant in the past five years or so?
- When will we hear public comment on this matter?
- Please publish the document being used to define the scope of the investigation which we are using to solicit bids.