



Minutes of May 6, 2025

A meeting of the Wausau Water Works Commission was called to order at 11:02 a.m. in City Hall on Tuesday, May 6, 2025. In compliance with Wisconsin Statutes, this meeting was posted and receipted for by the Wausau Daily Herald on May 2, 2025.

Members Present: President Diny, Commissioners Robinson, Hadley, Force, Watson
Others Present: Eric Lindman, Scott Boers, Ben Brooks, Anne Jacobson, Tonia Westphal/Clark Dietz, Joe Kafczynski/BecherHoppe

1) Approve Minutes of April 8, 2025 Meetings.

Robinson motioned to approve minutes. Seconded by Watson.
Motion carried 5-0.

2) Director's Report on Utility Operations.

Lindman highlighted in working with DNR, we have a closing date for lead service line in June and a target date to bring to council- financial assistance agreement to get that funding approved on May 27th. We've started discussions on closing for the 2025 loan. There's been many changes at the federal level but haven't seen a lot at the DNR, it's been stable, they're awaiting EPA's actions. Latest updates from USEPA is placed in the packet, PFAS and the Lead and Copper Rule in potentially extending those enforcement dates out a couple of years was pushed from American Water Works Association (AWWA) letter. I don't know how that's going to shake out but wanted to keep you apprised on some of those discussions that are happening. Updates on drinking water and wastewater operations and staffing that's also further on the agenda for utility staffing, but updates are included in the packet. We have projects starting at the wastewater. We had a siphon (in front of the chamber- Washington St.) that goes under the river, it froze most years, that's getting replaced. Clark Island building behind the old depot was never serviced for sewer, this project would be for that building too, the retaining wall on the river would also be reconstructed. We've had a lot of issues at Wastewater headworks screen, it's a big project, we are replacing and doing some building renovations with start up in June, it'll make maintenance easier, be a bit disruptive but will be a huge benefit moving forward.

Force questioned if there were going to be any traffic delays or barriers on Washington St and the time frame for the headworks project?

Kafczynski, engineer from BecherHoppe replied just the one lane and sidewalk detour anticipated and some short duration closures for getting equipment in and out.

Brooks replied the headworks project should be complete by October 2026.

Robinson questioned if locates were from broadband, fiber installs or if there were schedules of neighborhoods or project lists and the demand it placed on staff?

Boers replied they're called in individually, we're managing the amounts through permits through engineering department, they have to finish their current permit before they move on but there's 28 different boring companies in town, a couple blocks a day, each one 5-6 blocks is a lot

to locate, they are not just individual curb stops, they're vast areas that could be 2 to 3 blocks at a clip, but also lead service line replacement requiring staff time for locating due to the boring, to make sure our water mains and services are marked, and then homeowner locates and any construction locates just starting off the year but anticipate it's going to ramp up in the next couple of months. It's about 3-4 people a day all Summer. We'd talk about this before, contracting it was \$150,000 annually at that time for 7,000 locates a year and said we'd rather higher like 3 people, bring them in to work on locates full time and do other work other times of the year and we haven't moved on anything in there either.

Force recalled a discussion about getting paid \$80/ locate that was legislated, if that were still the case, at that rate, we were losing money and if it's an item in our budget or estimated cost?

Lindman replied we're not getting paid to do locates.

Boers stated we are required by the state to do locates, to have utilities in the ground, we are required to do locates when people are doing work around. It's not a general item in the budget, its normal operations, if estimated, annual cost operations would say around \$200,000.

Diny questioned if we received 1,000 locates to date.

Boers replied just over 1,000 locates was only for month of April.

Director's Report Placed on File.

3) Discussion and Update on the Current Financial Status of the Utility and the Proposed 2026- 2030 Capital Projects Proposed Schedule.

Diny advised Groat from finance is not present, we'll carry this item to next month.

No Action Taken.

4) Discussion and Possible Action Approving the Development of a Grease Management Program and Incorporate into City Ordinance.

Lindman began we accept about 40,000 gallons of grease trap waste each month from grease interceptors around the city from restaurants, kitchens. The County Health Department doesn't inspect or require maintenance on these. We could implement this program at the utility in our ordinance that would overlap with the plumbing code requiring they do inspections on their grease interceptors every 90 days, 4 times a year. This would help us understand how many are out there and that they are properly maintained for both interior/exterior grease tanks. The food waste and grease come in at a high concentration, it can be disruptive in our processes. Brooks has been doing a great job with the septic haulers to pace the volume coming in over time rather than all in one day but knowing these are properly maintained will help minimize the grease coming into our collections system. One option is to have an annual permit process where they provide us information where their grease tanks are maintained and inspected properly throughout the year, to get their annual permit they would provide those inspections to us. We wouldn't do those inspections; it'd be by 3rd party or the responsibility of the kitchen/ restaurants. We'll do a nominal fee for permit ever year of however many are out there. We began communication with the Health Department to get numbers on how many are within the city limits and where they are but we'd like feedback, ideas and support from the commission to move this forward and bring back a draft.

Diny added that when there's grease trap back up or when they have an issue, that's when it was determined they haven't had them looked at or inspected in years, this gives us opportunity to see what that inventory is and stay ahead.

Robinson questioned if the septic haulers were picking up from restaurants in Wausau or through the area, if we could work with retail food regulations to get this incorporated into the health codes in addition to the ordinance. In our evaluation of options, we would look at who and how we are serving and what's the best regulatory mechanism to accomplish the end goal, fearing that if we don't have a mechanism to do the inspection, we'll be right back where we are today

where it backs up, we'll need to look for a realistic and practical compliance without creating additional work for our staff, encouraging us to work closely with the Health Department on that retail food and if there are any alternatives relative to disposal like rock oil if this is the easiest and cheapest for them or viable cost-effective alternatives?

Brooks added he worked with an individual hauler to maintain a low level of gallons per month, weekly they spread it out and it's hard for them because they try to concentrate their grease traps all in a week to get rid of, they should understand how it impacts the treatment and processes. It's been working well but what prompted this was one of the local establishment's grease tank reservoirs backed up, the hauler contacted me and we worked together to spread that load out and he indicated it hadn't been pumped in years.

Lindman replied that we'll work with the Health Agencies but unsure of what it would take for them to add things into how they are inspecting and their process. We've reached out to the Health Department but it's been a couple of calls and haven't dove into it.

Brooks replied a company out of Green Bay goes to these establishments and collects grease weekly, monthly and disposes of it in Green Bay. I'm not sure Rock Oil accepts grease trap waste, and unsure of the one in Stratford. I've reached out to several utilities and some have the grease management programs managed and administered through their Health Departments, while other utilities managed it through their inspections department, but that would be yet to be determined on who would manage it. It will be a big task.

Force motioned to support this action of approving the development of a grease management program and draft this to bring back to the commission and was surprised we didn't have something like this in place. Seconded by Watson.

Motion Carried 5-0.

5) Discussion and Possible Action Approving Restructuring Septic/Holding/Grease Tank Waste Hauling/Dumping Rates Fee Schedule.

Brooks began with the approval of the commission; we'd like to move forward with restructuring the holding/septic tank hauler rates fee schedule- holding tank, septic tank, grease trap waste coming into the plant and do away with the blended rate for the fact that you don't know what's coming in with these loads because you have to test every single load to make certain of it. There're companies that manufacture septage disposal monitoring equipment that will monitors flows and keeps the haulers honest but it's very expensive to incorporate, it distinguishes types of waste by different pH levels and if it's a holding or septic tank but not necessarily grease trap waste, maybe in the long run it may pay for itself, but we'll have to look into those costs as well. The current fee schedule uses cubic feet units, but other utilities I've reached out to use units of per thousand gallons for the surcharge calculation. It'd be my recommendation to switch over to that as its more intuitive and easier for the haulers to understand. The fee schedule attached are utilities I've reached out to, it costs different facilities different types of waste to treat, the blank utilities are ones not accepting the waste or they don't have a blended rate. With your approval, we'll restructure a draft as with the grease management program and present it at a future meeting.

Robinson motioned to authorize, direct staff to update the hauler fee schedule reflecting cost/impact of the system would be based on comparable. Seconded by Force.

Motion Carried 5-0.

6) Discussion and Update on Utility Staffing and Operations.

Lindman recapped we've had discussions over the past 4-5 years as the plants were being built about issues with retention, needing staff additions. Included in this packet, Baker Tilly's staffing assessment from when we started having these discussions, we haven't moved forward with a lot of that. Just last year, a couple of additional staffing was approved at Wastewater and 1

at Water for the 2025 budget, we're advertising those positions to fill them. We are at a point, Wastewater's doing fairly well but at Water not so much, we just lost another individual. Looking back at the information that was provided, we're going to have to move forward and take some actions. We'll be having discussions looking at wages for retention, wage studies comparable at other utilities as far as where we're losing people to, whether it be for higher pay, more benefits or what the case may be. I bring this forward because we are at the situation a few years ago that we talked about, we are on the precipice of the potential of having to contract out some of our operations and that's a real concern because it's going to be way more expensive than it would be to hire or add staff.

Boers reiterated the importance of bringing this forward, we started talking about this 4 years ago, we had 2 very experienced staff members we wanted to get as much knowledge as we could from them before retiring, we didn't add staff at that time. Now we are sitting with our operator who came to us with a lot of experience who is now leaving. We have 1 person who's been with us long enough to see the construction of that plant as a relief operator who's moved into a technical position, he's been there for 2 years and that's our most experienced plant personnel for our staff, in charge of our \$60 million facility. The 2 people working under him have just over 1 year of technician experience each, you've got 4 years and 7 months combined total experience. In the operations world, you're going to pay for experience one way or the other, so we either hire people with experience, pay a little more money, or we have people with less experience who make mistakes and/or we'd have to contract out the operations that generally costs a lot more money. One distribution maintainer we just lost, came to us with some experience and a Commercial Driver's License (CDL), we're paying anywhere from \$10,000 - \$12,000 by the time we pay wages to bring in an employee without a CDL and to bring them up to speed that costs more than if we bring people in with some kind of experience or technical aptitude that relates to what we do. Our employees are great, they want to learn, they fit in well, they have good culture but they're inexperienced. Right now, we are paying for inexperienced employees. We have a couple of employees, this key employee, if they leave, we are not going to have experience to even train people coming in, it's like the blind leading the blind, we do not have any succession planning. You're supposed to have an heir and a spare. If Brooks leaves tomorrow, he's got an heir, maybe a spare, I have nobody, if I get hit by a bus, Lindman's running the utility. I don't know what to tell you or what needs to be said or what kind of catastrophe has to happen before something gets done, we've been harping on this for 4 years.

Robinson questioned if this was something HR could look at, with the new HR Director for the City. The County is in the process of updating their most recent pay study that's done on a regular basis. We need to look at those areas where you seem to be falling behind and not able to retain or attract people. I strongly encourage HR department to look into this and accelerate any plans relative. Was there a reason they are leaving- wages, hours, are we doing post-employment surveys? Could we have the HR Director weigh in at the next meeting relative to a timely approach to address this issue?

Boers replied post-employment surveys are being done but haven't seen results from HR but through conversations with the employees is generally more money. One of these employees went to Weston for \$5 dollars more an hour, the last distribution maintainer we lost went to Schofield for \$5 dollars more an hour, one of those positions were slightly different but it was

more money.

Diny replied, we've scheduled a meeting to talk about this whether it's city wide or target utility, it could be either but we'll bring it back, we'll have to get a handle on it and find out where we can go to improve it.

Brooks added they're in the same boat as the water department, every time advertisements come out for job openings in Schofield, Weston, Rib Mountain, Metro, Stevens Point, Plover, they're all paying higher, we sit there, hold our breaths hoping that they're not going to leave us.

Boers stated Plover just filled a position at the same rate we're advertising for a supervisor.

Force added, this was at almost every meeting, we've had HR look at this, we talked about internships with the technical schools/other institutions, done salary surveys, we've done exit interviews, we just don't seem to have a handle on it, but if it's just salary, we have one solution for that. There's seemed to be something more systemic. If we continue to study this, we aren't going to come up with the right answers, if it's more pay, that has a significant financial impact on the city and I don't know where that money comes from or what the answer is, we've been unable to deal with this successfully and that's a failure on our part.

Boers stated the memo in the packet by Toni Vanderboom to the Council in 2021, at that time, she did a survey of employees, picked out 5 or 6 questions and asked why they would leave a job/stay at a job, three criteria, all top answers came back to pay. The other options could be worked around, everyone stays at a place of employment for their own reasons but if you could work for a place 2 miles down the road for \$5 dollars more an hour, where are you going to be?

Brooks added another thing to look at is how competitive they are as opposed to surrounding communities within 50-to-100-mile radius, that's where we're generally losing our employees, to local communities.

Hadley commented there are a lot of information in here, it needs to be made a priority.

Diny replied there is a lot of information, we'll get the new HR Director in the loop on this to see if we concentrate on the utility or take a broader approach, in the short term this is a priority we need to look at, its two-fold, ours and HR.

Lindman reiterated working with the new HR Director Lisa, as she has experience in this, hoping there could be some potential opportunities and recommendation from her on where to go and present this to the commission. I know there's financial implications and discussions about revenue in the utility, affordability and things like that and we've talked about the hundreds of millions of dollars of assets we have and maintain but the asset that gets loss is our staff, the number one assets in the city and if we don't maintain the assets as far as our staff, then none of these things will function. That has to be a priority and has to be incorporated in the budget moving into 2026 regardless of what its going to look like and what the recommendations are, we need to make room for it, it's the only way the utility is going to be successful. Right now, we are on a path to not being successful, it's very dangerous.

Diny stated we've talked about a lot of things like the pilot payment we have to put on the budget or where does that go, could that provide extra financial revenue for any additions. A few years ago, we looked at abolishing the commission, we as a commission have a better understanding of the utilities and it has to stay here. I think we could help drive that; we'll get this back as soon as we can through HR.

No Action Taken.

7) Adjourn.

Diny: Prior to adjourning, Joe Gehin will be invited here at the next meeting on the 3rd, we'll bid him farewell and welcome again Deb Hadley.

Watson motioned to adjourn. Seconded by Hadley.

Motion carried 5-0.

Link to view meeting in its entirety: <https://tinyurl.com/wausaucitycouncil>

Gina Vang, Recording Secretary

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