

As voted by the Board of Trustees and in accordance with the notice of the meeting, the monthly Workshop Meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Portland Water District was held in the Nixon Training Center at the general offices of the District, 225 Douglass Street, Portland, Maine, on Monday, January 12, 2025. In attendance from staff were D. Kane, S. Firmin, G. Pellerin, C. Poulin, J. Wallace, M. Clements, J. Hudak, and D. Katsiaficas.

Trustee Shaughnessy attended remotely.

President Lunt convened the workshop meeting at 6:36 p.m.

## **1. Media Training**

Donna Katsiaficas, Corporation Counsel, and Michelle Clements, Communications and Public Relations Director, provided training on media engagement and trustee roles in public communication.

Trustees were reminded that the District is subject to Maine's Freedom of Access Act, which guarantees the public the right to comment at regular business meetings. Standing board rules, adopted initially around 2000 and amended periodically, govern public comment and apply equally to in-person and remote participants.

The presentation explained the distinction between open public forums and limited public forums. Open forums, which occur at the beginning and end of regular business meetings, allow the public to speak on any topic and are strongly protected by First Amendment free speech rights. In these forums, speech may only be regulated if it is both disruptive and offensive in nature. By contrast, public comment on agenda items constitutes a limited public forum, allowing the Board to require speakers to remain on topic. Public comment at workshops and committee meetings is discretionary. Time limits of approximately five minutes per speaker may be imposed, with extensions granted at the discretion of the Board President.

Trustees were advised that the purpose of public comment is to hear from constituents, not to engage in dialogue or answer questions during the meeting. Appropriate responses include acknowledging comments and coordinating follow-up through the General Manager. A case example involving the Bangor City Council was presented to illustrate challenges associated with remote participation and inappropriate conduct. Trustees were reminded that remote participants must be afforded the same rights as in-person attendees under state law and that the District's Zoom webinar format provides adequate controls. As a last resort, the chair may adjourn a meeting if conduct becomes unmanageable.

The presentation also addressed written communications received by trustees. All trustee correspondence related to District business is subject to public records and retention requirements. Trustees were encouraged to use their District email accounts to ensure proper archiving and compliance with the Freedom of Access Act. Trustees were advised to notify the General Manager or Corporation Counsel if communications feel threatening or concerning, noting that while senders generally cannot be blocked, assistance is available if issues escalate.

The final portion of the presentation focused on media engagement and the trustee role. Media participation was described as a strategic opportunity to provide accurate information, build public trust, and highlight the District's work. Trustees were reminded that, as elected officials, their statements may be perceived as representing the District or the full Board, even when speaking informally. Trustees were encouraged to clarify when they are speaking in an individual capacity and to coordinate with the communications office for support, fact-checking, and follow-up.

Best practices for media interactions were reviewed, including preparation, pausing before responding, avoiding speculation, and clearly and concisely framing key messages. Guidance was also provided on effective on-camera and virtual presentations. Trustees asked questions throughout the presentation, and both presenters fielded those questions, offering helpful

feedback and practical guidance, including a discussion related to social media engagement and misinformation. Staff noted that additional guidance for trustees on social media practices may be developed.

**2. General Manager's Comments**

Scott Firmin, General Manager, provided several operational and informational updates. He explained that the placards placed in front of trustees, reminding them to turn on their microphones when speaking, are intended to ensure the public can hear comments and to improve the accuracy of meeting recordings and minutes. The placards are a prototype and will be resized to better fit behind the nameplates; an updated version is expected at the next regular meeting.

He also provided an update on the status of arbitration proceedings, noting that the hearing was postponed after one of the arbitrators was unexpectedly hospitalized the day before the scheduled meeting. The arbitration has not yet been rescheduled, and the District is working to do so as quickly as possible. Trustees will be notified once additional information becomes available.

Looking ahead, the General Manager advised that next month's workshop will include a long-anticipated review of the water main renewal program, focusing on opportunities to enhance communication, improve efficiency, and inform future planning. He also discussed developments related to the District's biosolids project, noting increasing regulatory and environmental challenges, including recent news regarding the Juniper Ridge landfill expansion and ongoing Department of Environmental Protection review. He reported that staff are preparing a draft request for proposals to advance a project to the 30 percent design stage, including cost estimates, timelines, and ownership considerations. Trustees will receive a comprehensive introduction to the topic at the February meeting, along with a proposed schedule and outline for future discussions.

Trustee Douglass asked for information regarding the removal of fluoride from the water system, given recent remarks by Robert F. Kennedy, the Director of the CDC, that the federal government will be advising water systems to remove fluoride from their water systems. The General Manager indicated he would get information on the topic and provide it to her. Corporation Counsel, Donna Katsiaticas explained that, under Maine law, decisions to add or remove fluoride are made through local voter approval, not by the District or federal directive, and she noted that any removal of fluoride would require a similar voting process across the District's member communities. Mr. Firmin further stated that staff will develop factual talking points to support trustees and internal communications, consistent with the media engagement guidance discussed earlier.

**3. Other Business**

None.

**4. Adjourn**

The meeting was adjourned at 7:31 p.m.

Submitted by,

*Donna M. Katsiaticas*  
Donna Katsiaticas  
Clerk