



# PUBLIC UTILITIES DEPARTMENT



01/11/2023

3-Year Strategic Plan (FY 2023-2025)

The Public Utilities Department is committed to environmental stewardship, protection of human health, and local economic vitality today and in the future.

# Public Utilities Department Strategic Plan (FY2023-2025)

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# Public Utilities Department

## 3-YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN (FY 2023-2025)



### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, data-driven decisions and innovative solutions to water issues have been at the forefront of every industry. The Public Utilities Department (PUD) is no exception. We are committed to providing an uninterrupted supply of safe drinking water for public health, fire protection and economic productivity, and to safely conveying and recycling wastewater in an environmentally responsible way. Our staff pursues continuous advancements in water-use resiliency and conservation, which are cost-effective and energy-efficient ways of ensuring future water reliability for the businesses and residents in Athens-Clarke County.

This report includes our three-year strategic plan to address the most important strategic goals. The goals in this report (Attachment 1) are built on input from employees and stakeholders, industry standards and regulatory criteria. The goals align with the *Mayor and Commission's Draft Strategic Plan Goals, Strategies and Initiatives-FY 23-25*, and the *Effective Utility Management* primer (EUM). The EUM is a guideline written by multiple water associations to

## Public Utilities Department Strategic Plan (FY2023-2025)

support utilities in change management benchmarking. It offers steps to achieve excellence in utility performance, and address its top priority issues through a continuous improvement and management approach. Other tools and resources used include a department-wide SWOT analysis, EUM self-assessment survey, and the 2020 Operational Analysis Office (OAO) audit of the Water Business Office (WBO) division

### Service Delivery Plan vs. Strategic Plan

Long-term water and wastewater planning is critical to successfully managing a community's water quality and resources. The Public Utilities Department updates its Service Delivery Plan (SDP) every five years. The SDP is a detailed outline of projects that the department plans to implement in the next twenty years. The plan includes how and when each capital project will be executed, using a prioritized ranking system and budget estimates. The SDP details the level and types of services that the PUD provides to meet the needs of its customers.

In order to measure goals and major projects identified by the SDP, the department needs to create a strategic plan. A strategic plan outlines the department's mission, vision, and high-level goals for the next three to five years. It also creates a roadmap for how goals will be measured, and the major milestones and project steps needed to meet each goal, i.e. how PUD will achieve each goal. A strategic plan documents the journey from where you are now, to where you want to go. It also provides a guide on how we can best respond to future opportunities and challenges.

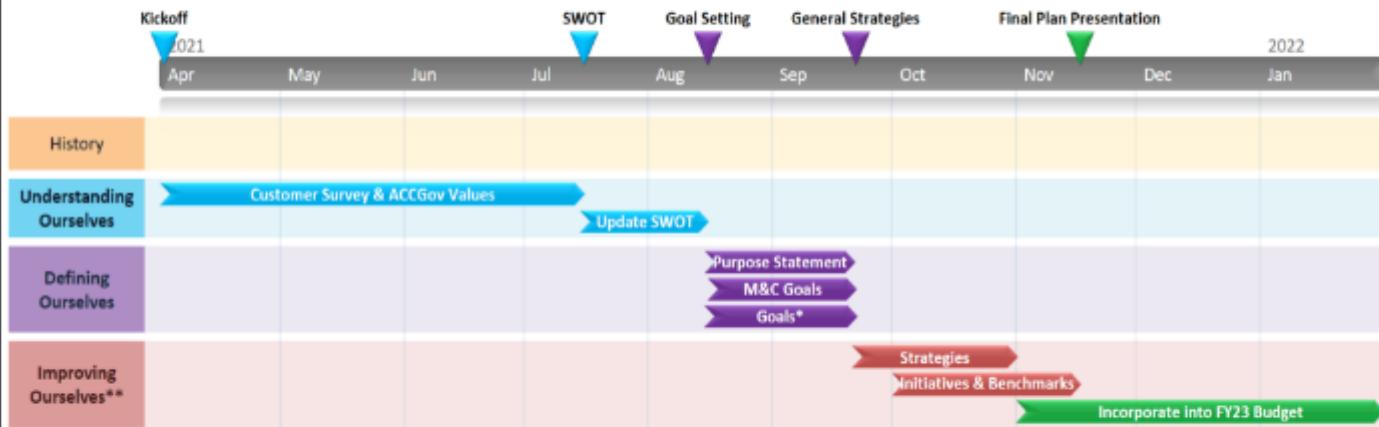
Key components of the PUD's strategic plan include:

- Identify critical issues and service gaps
  - Effective Utility Management Self-Assessment
  - Review of public audit survey
  - SWOT Analysis
- Identify Business Standards and Values of the department
  - Review and revise the Mission Statement
  - Review and revise Goals and Objectives

### Our Strategic Plan Roadmap

Fueled by passionate staff and participating leaders, the Public Utilities Department has completed its first strategic plan. The team approached all the department employees for internal feedback, and utilized a public audit survey for community input. In February 2021, the PUD presented a schedule for completing the strategic plan was presented to the Manager's office in the FY2022 budget request. See *Figure 1: 2021 Strategic Planning*

# 2021 Strategic Planning



\* Goals will address M&C Strategic Commitments

\*\* Improving ourselves using (Effective Utility Management) EUM Framework

Figure 1: 2021 Strategic Planning

## Conclusions

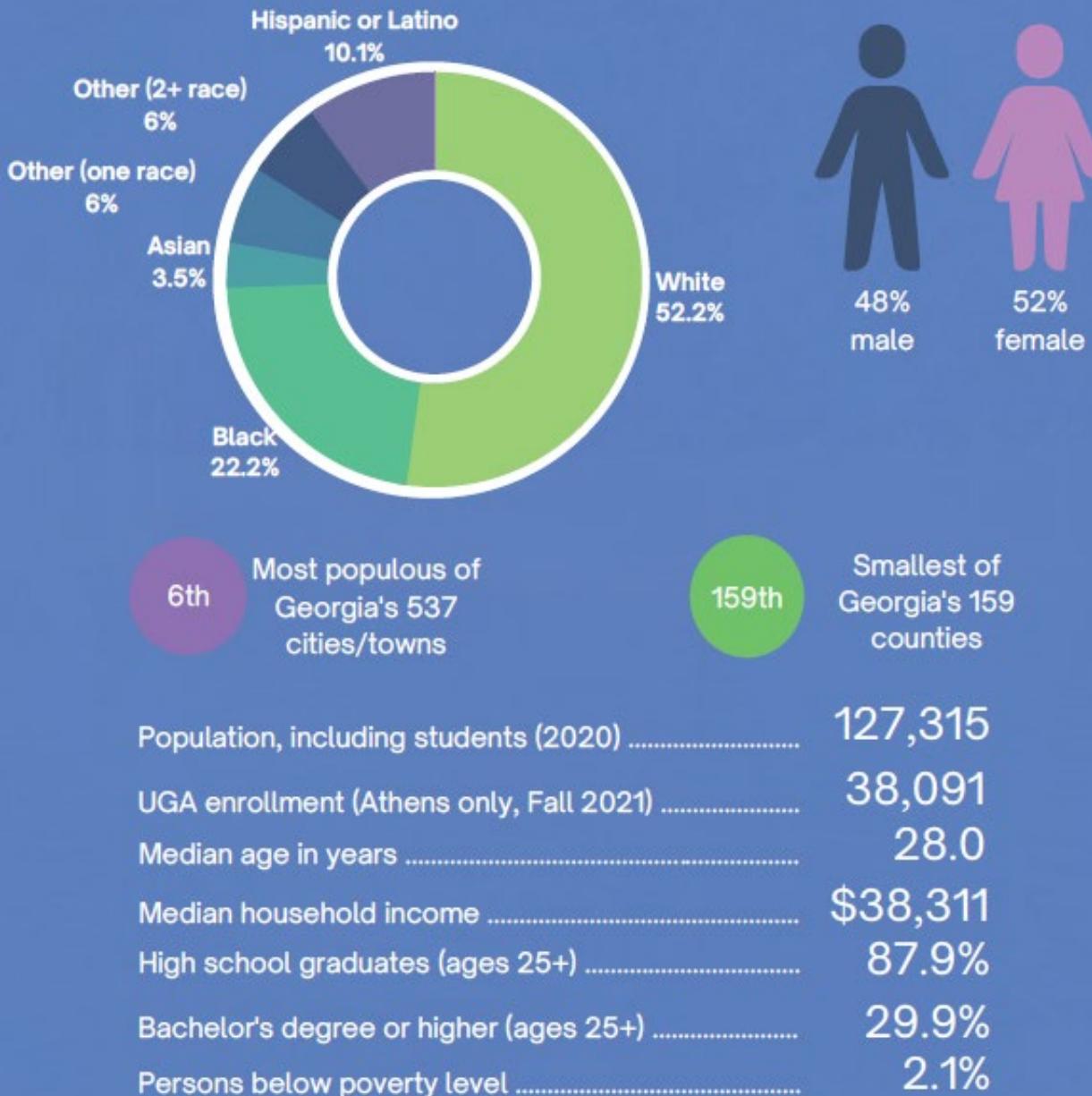
The PUD department, like many in our ACCGov organization, consists of many dedicated leaders and unsung heroes that work 24/7 to provide clean, constant water service in the county. Our team is fortunate that most of our employees took time to voice their opinions and passions in this exercise. Our final goals reflect this feedback. Additionally, we are fortunate to have the opportunity to belong to an international community dedicated to providing clean and sustainable water. This includes a full spectrum of benchmarking, best-practices, data analysis and many other resources.

## UTILITY OVERVIEW



## Introduction – Athens-Clarke County

# Athens by the Numbers



## Introduction – Public Utilities Department

# Public Utilities Department

**200** Full-time positions

**24** Part-time positions



*Numbers as reported July 2022*

## Public Utilities Department Strategic Plan (FY2023-2025)

### Public Utilities Department – Mission

Our department has two major mission statements, as well as a branding statement, on the next page, which serves to create a cohesive and succinct message in all public outreach communication.



## Mission 01

Our staff is committed to providing safe drinking water for public health, fire protection, and economic prosperity, and safely conveying and reclaiming wastewater using environmentally responsible methods.

## 02

We run an effective and reliable enterprise, responsibly reinvesting in public health, environmental protection, and infrastructure at a value to our customers.

*Water Works. Today. Tomorrow. For Life.*



## Public Utilities Department Strategic Plan (FY2023-2025)

### Public Utilities Department – Brand Statement

BRAND STATEMENT: We produce clean water using reliable and responsible methods because Athens depends on this service - water is the backbone of life.

What We Do	How We Do It	Why We Do It
PRODUCE CLEAN WATER	RELIABLY & RESPONSIBLY	WATER IS THE BACKBONE OF LIFE

"The term 'brand' is the name we give to the list of perceptions or attributes that define what you can expect from a company, person, or product. It also refers to the asset that is created when people have positive feelings about a product or organization...The objective is to help community members be 'prepared to trust' the organization when the community faces important decisions."

- *Building the Wastewater Utility Brand - Utility Brand Networking*, by John Ruetten

### Public Utilities Department – System Information

Today's ACC water system has a design capacity of 36 MGD and a permitted peak day capacity of 34.75 MGD. The system produces and delivers high-quality drinking water that complies with all current federal and state standards to nearly all of ACC residential, commercial, governmental, and industrial users within its political boundaries. Approximately two percent (2%) of the population maintains private wells for water supply. Another small



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portion receives water from one of nine private community water systems in operation, serving a total population of approximately 2,300 individuals (GAEPD, 2019).

In the fall of 2021, the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD) reduced permitted water from 25.5MGD monthly average to 18MGD. This reduction was made because the EPD reviewed the previously permitted amount against growth and demand. The PUD has since written a Water Conservation Plan and Water Loss Control Plan in 2022. See *Figure 2: Permitted Raw Water Withdrawals and Wastewater Discharges (2018)*.

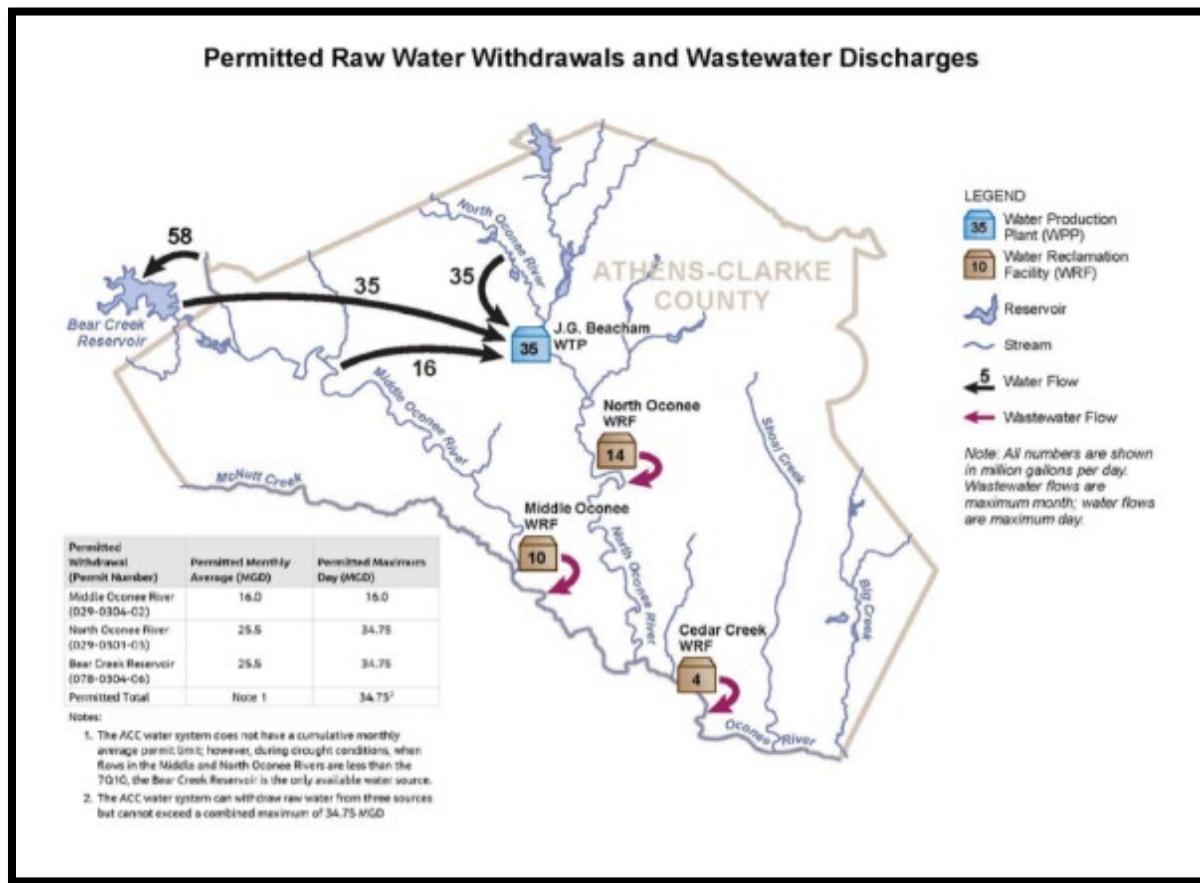


Figure 2: Permitted Raw Water Withdrawals and Wastewater Discharges (2018)

## Water System

Raw water for the ACC water system is withdrawn from the North Oconee River, Middle Oconee River and from the Bear Creek Reservoir. ACC is permitted to withdraw up to a combined total of 34.75 MGD (maximum day) from these sources.

PUD is permitted to withdraw from the North Oconee River, at the J.G. Beacham WTP, when the flow is greater than 7Q10 (the lowest average discharge during 7 consecutive days, occurring once every 10 years on average) of 31.6 cubic feet per second (cfs). PUD's

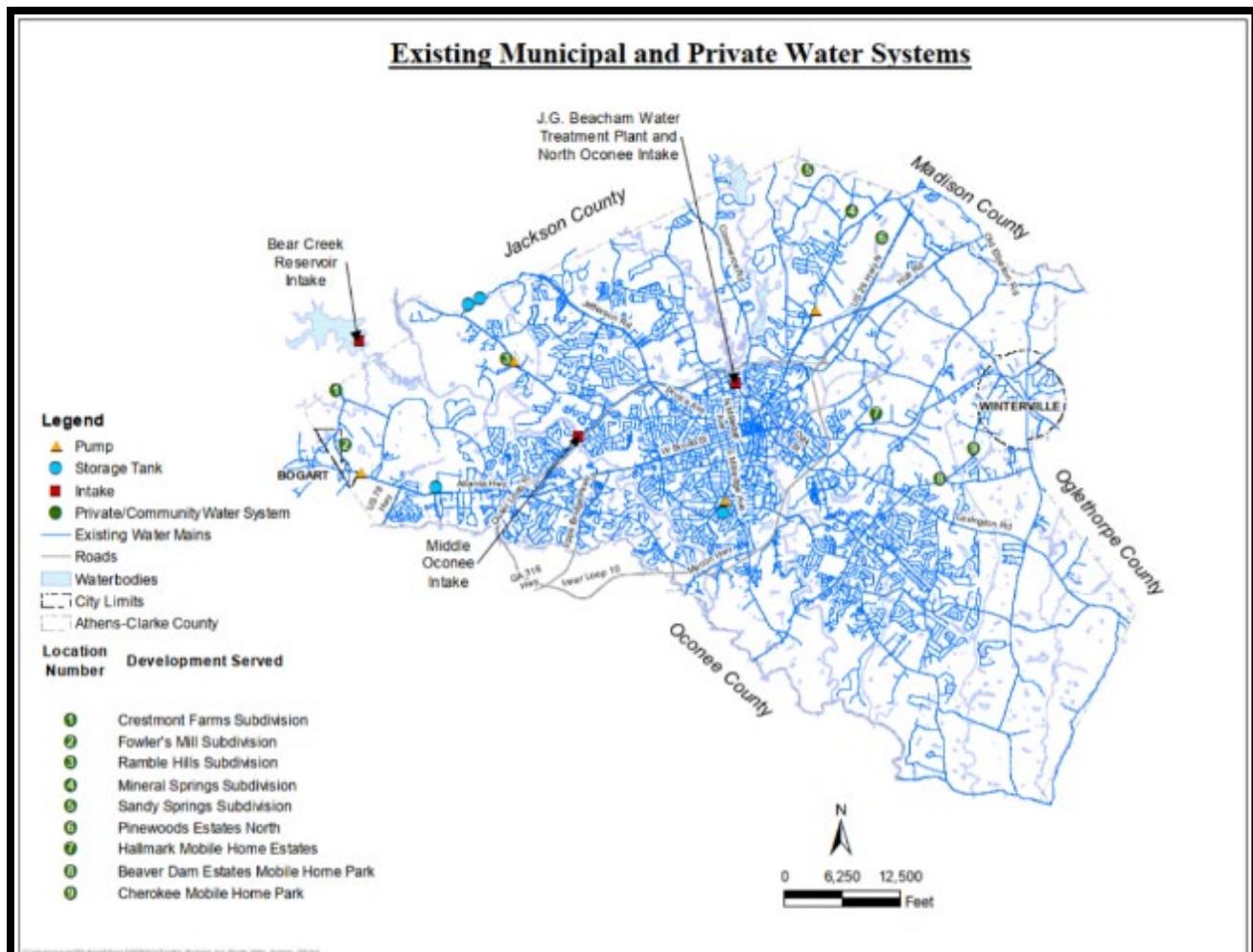
## Public Utilities Department Strategic Plan (FY2023-2025)

permitted withdrawal from the North Oconee River is 20.5 MGD maximum day, 18.0 MGD monthly average.

PUD is permitted to withdraw from the Middle Oconee River, just upstream of S.R. Loop 10, when the flow is greater than 7Q10 (44.4 cfs). Permitted withdrawal from the Middle Oconee River is 16 MGD maximum day, 16 MGD monthly average.

The Bear Creek Reservoir, constructed in June 2002, provides off-stream storage for ACC, as well as for Barrow, Jackson, and Oconee counties. The Bear Creek Reservoir was designed to provide low flow protection to the Middle and North Oconee Rivers and must be operated to pass flows equal to 4.0 cfs (the 7Q10 downstream of the reservoir) or greater at all times. The permitted yield of the Bear Creek Reservoir for all four counties is a monthly average 58 MGD and a maximum day 79 MGD. The ACC allotment of this yield is 44 percent (monthly average 25.5 MGD and maximum day 34.75 MGD).

The existing ACC water system and locations of the private water system are shown on *Figure 3: Existing Municipal and Private Water Systems*.



## Public Utilities Department Strategic Plan (FY2023-2025)

*Figure 3: Existing Municipal and Private Water Systems*

### Wastewater System

ACC PUD currently provides wastewater collection and treatment to ACC industrial and commercial users and to approximately 75 percent of the residential population. This section details the PUD wastewater system, as well as private wastewater system and areas served by private septic systems. As the natural drainage of the land influences wastewater collection, a discussion of the drainage basins in ACC is provided in the [2020 Service Delivery Plan Update](#).

PUD's wastewater Service Area is comprised of three major Service Areas: North Oconee, Middle Oconee, and Cedar Creek Water Reclamation Facility (WRF) Service Areas (See *Figure 4: Wastewater Service Areas*). The PUD wastewater collection system consists of approximately 487 miles of gravity sewers and one pump station (Weatherly Woods Pump Station), which serves approximately 2.5 miles of force main piping. Gravity sewer pipes range in size from 8 to 54 inches in diameter. They include trunks (pipes along the Middle Oconee, North Oconee, or Oconee River), interceptors (pipes along streams or as outfalls), and smaller collectors and service lines, which are required to establish customer connections.

The North Oconee WRF Service Area includes approximately 175 miles of gravity sewer lines, ranging in size from 8 to 54 inches in diameter. The Middle Oconee WRF Service Area includes approximately 229 miles of gravity sewer, ranging in size from 8 to 42 inches in diameter. The Cedar Creek WRF Service Area was originally developed to eliminate several small treatment systems. Within the Cedar Creek WRF Service Area are 83 miles of gravity sewer pipe, ranging from 8 to 36 inches in diameter. Additionally, a pump station located in the Weatherly Woods Subdivision transfers wastewater flow via 2.5 miles of force main from the Upper Shoals Creek Basin to the Cedar Creek Interceptor.



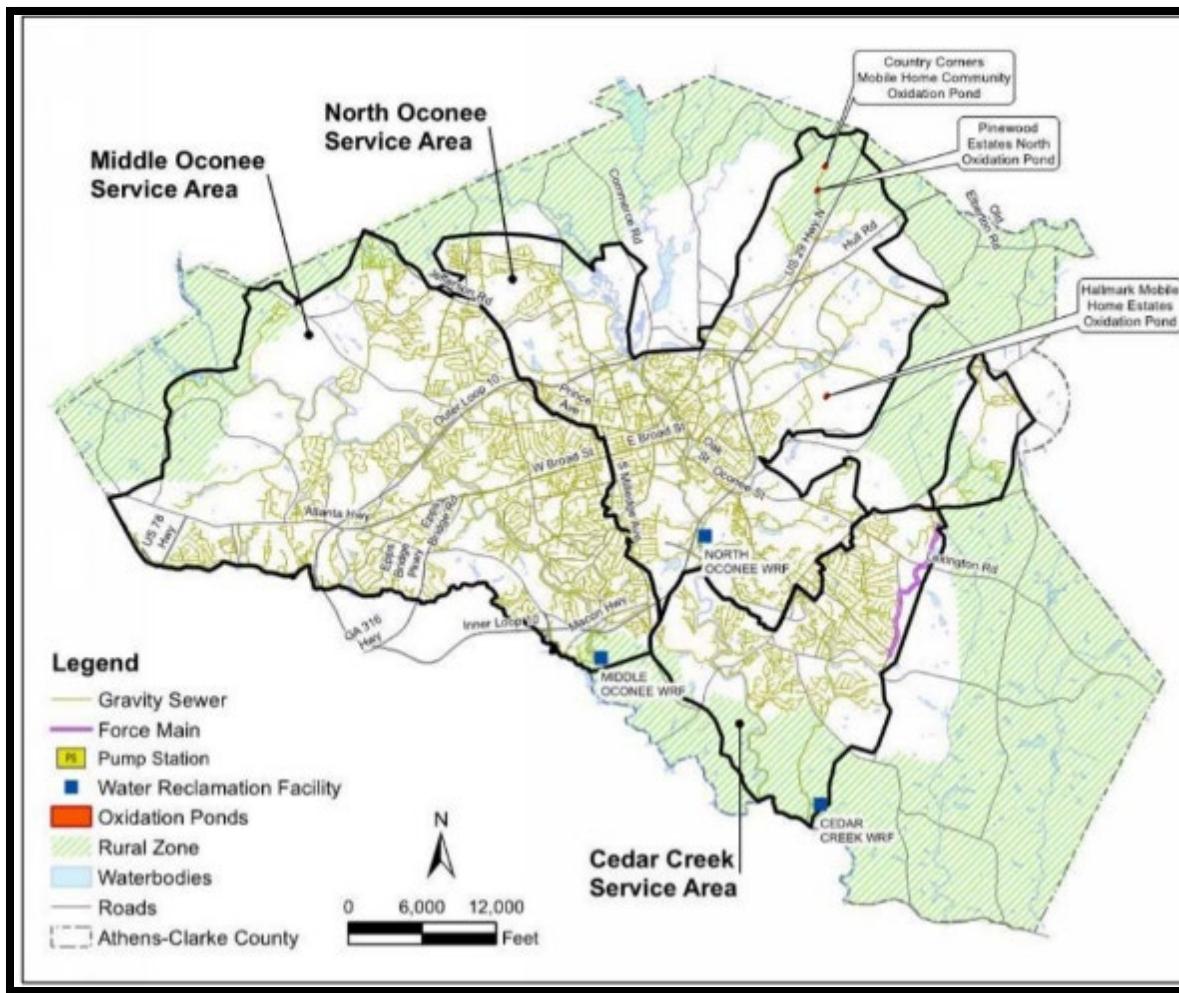


Figure 4: Wastewater Service Areas

## EFFECTIVE UTILITY MANAGEMENT

Effective Utility Management (EUM) is a framework written by experienced utility professionals across the nation that guides water utilities to respond to the challenges they face. It identifies “Ten Attributes of Effectively Managed Utilities.” These ten attributes help management maintain a balanced approach to all aspects of utility operations, while at the same time zeroing in on areas that are ripe for improvement.

Effective Utility Management: A Primer for Water and Wastewater Utilities is the fundamental resource that PUD uses to innovate and improve organizational performance. The Primer has four key components which, when taken together, form the basis for a complete cycle of effective and sustainable utility management:

## Public Utilities Department Strategic Plan (FY2023-2025)

- **The Ten Attributes of Effectively Managed Water Sector Utilities (Attributes).** These Attributes are intended to provide a clear set of reference points and are intended to help utilities maintain a balanced focus on all important operational areas rather than reactively moving from one problem to the next or focusing on the “problem of the day.” See *Figure 5: The Attributes and Keys to Effective Utility Management*.
- **Five Keys to Management Success.** These proven approaches help utilities maximize their resources and improve performance. Utilities create a robust foundation for strong, ongoing performance in the Ten Attribute areas by embedding the Five Keys to Management Success into their workplace culture. See *Figure 5*.
- **Where to Begin – A Self-Assessment Tool.** The rigorous and systematic self-assessment tool described in the Primer helps utility managers and staff evaluate their operations and identify where to begin improvement efforts. By assessing how a utility performs relative to the Attributes, utility managers can gain a more balanced and comprehensive picture of their organization.
- **Getting to Work – Implementation of Effective Utility Management.** The Implementation section is a central connecting point between multiple elements of EUM. It focuses on an overall continual improvement cycle (the “EUM cycle”), and describes how a utility’s self-assessment results can lead into a cycle of planning, implementing effective practices, measuring performance, and making adjustments over time.

Again, the EUM Primer is a guide that defines each of the ten attributes and five keys to success. During the PUD’s preparation for the strategic plan, each division leader was asked to complete the EUM Self-Assessment tool. The tool allowed our leaders to candidly assess current conditions and benchmark strengths and areas needing improvements. Each one of the ten attributes is assessed (rated) and then ranked in order of importance. The rating description guide, attributes and attribute components are described in *Appendix A: EUM Self-Assessment Tool*.



Figure 5: The Attributes and Keys to Effective Utility Management

The chart that follows (Figure 6) gives a graphic representation of the current PUD self-assessment, finalized on December 10, 2021. Note that Attributes graphed into the orange shaded quadrant are both very important (ranked horizontally 1-4), and have low achievement (rated vertically 4-5), and would typically be selected as the highest priority Attribute areas for moving forward with improvement actions.

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Attributes falling into the yellow shaded area indicate medium importance and a moderate level of current achievement; these would typically be selected as additional strong candidates for improvement efforts.

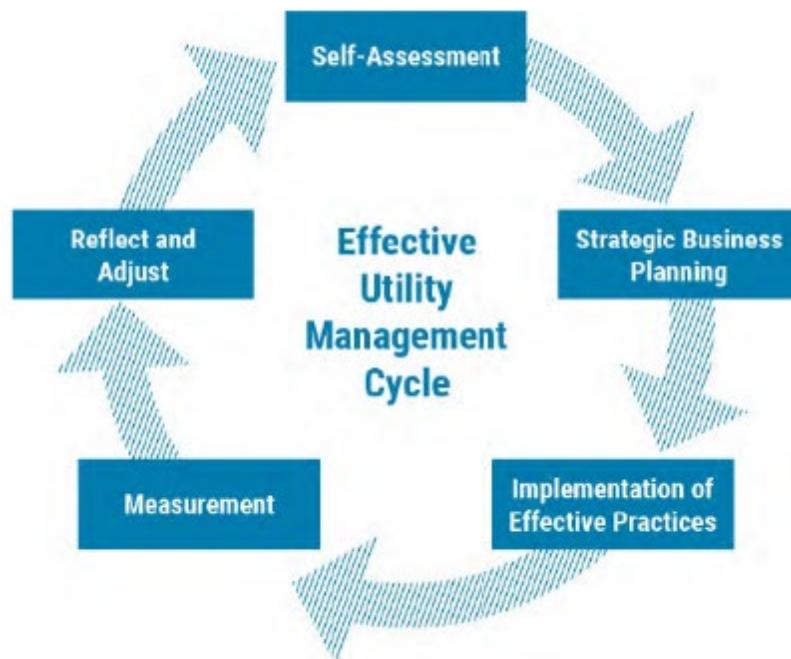
Graph Results of each Attributes Group Rating and Ranking											EUM Self-Assessment 12-10-21	
4												
3					ED, OO							
1	PQ											
PRIORITY		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
		More Important					Less Important					
		RANKING										

Figure 6: EUM Self-Assessment Graphic Results for PUD

Per the results above, PUD leaders perceive Product Quality (PQ) and the most important Attribute (rank=1) and considers this attribute at a high current level of achievement (rate=1). Likewise, some areas of potential improvement include Employee and Leadership Development (ED) which is ranked at #5 and rated at a 3. Operational Optimization (OO) is similarly an attribute of potential improvement.

Like every successful management model, the EUM cycle is a continuous process. Strategic Business Planning is the next phase after attributes are selected for improvement from the Self-Assessment tool. Implementation and Measurement of Effective Practices will follow, and finally, the utility will Reflect and Adjust. See *Figure 7: Effective Utility Management Cycle*. The Public Utilities Department (PUD) will utilize the self-assessment, along with the SWOT analysis, audit survey and capital improvements program to direct the second phase, Strategic Business Planning, i.e. the contents of this three-year strategic plan.

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*Figure 7: Effective Utility Management Cycle*

## SWOT ANALYSIS

A SWOT Analysis enables an organization to identify its current Strengths and Weaknesses, possible Opportunities and potential Threats. It helps to build on what the organization does well, address what is lacking, and minimize risks. The SWOT Analysis assesses the organization's position before making any new strategic decisions. Every organization – even the largest corporations – has a finite labor supply, production capacity and capital resources. Evaluating the organization's strengths, etc., helps to determine where and when to allocate these resources in a manner that will result in the highest possible potential for the organization's goals, growth and sustainability.

In July 2021, the PUD invited every one of its employees to participate in a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) meeting. The SWOT analysis was conducted from June through November 2021 to allow as many employees as possible to participate. The SWOT exercise allowed employees to discuss internal and external issues. Each division met with two facilitators without their shift leaders or division managers to give their feedback on current conditions. Each division's leaders participated in a SWOT analysis and the EUM Self-Assessment tool during a monthly superintendents meeting. An estimated 72% of PUD employees, or 140 employees participated in the SWOT analysis.

SWOT attendees were allowed three ways to contribute candidly. First, each employee could speak during the meeting and the facilitators took notes on a white board. Secondly, each employee could choose to submit written feedback. Finally, each employee was welcome to approach the facilitators during the SWOT meeting or at any time after to discuss feedback. Each of the three options offered employees the choice to submit their feedback anonymously.

The Public Utilities Department (PUD) conducted its SWOT analysis using the definitions and examples shown in Figures 8 and 9 below. Figure 9 displays the SWOT Analysis definitions and Figure 9 the examples provided to each group.

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	HELPFUL <b>STRENGTHS</b>	HARMFUL <b>WEAKNESSES</b>
INTERNAL	Strengths are areas where your unit is already performing well. They can be broad or specific aspects of your organization that run smoothly, experience few shortcomings, or meet/exceed professional performance expectations.	Weaknesses are areas where your unit could use some improvement. They can be areas where your organization has fewer resources than peers, aspects that continually experience problems, or where you feel like you're constantly falling behind.
EXTERNAL	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
	Opportunities are options that for improving upon your unit. These can be external resources that could be taken advantage of, new practices or procedures, and ways to bolster existing strengths or address weaknesses.	Threats are external influences that can compromise your unit's strengths or expose its weaknesses. Threats can be influences from competitive peers, or any factor that may create challenges in performing your unit's usual activities.

Figure 8: SWOT Definitions

	HELPFUL <b>STRENGTHS</b>	HARMFUL <b>WEAKNESSES</b>
INTERNAL	Examples:  * Award-winning people and facilities * Dedicated Superheroes * We provide an excellent product * Skilled & knowledgeable staff * Abundance of data * Supportive leadership	Examples:  * Aging technology and equipment * Poor communication within department * Limited growth opportunity/ career ladder * Inadequate leadership * Infrastructure age/ high maintenance level
EXTERNAL	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
	Examples:  * New billing system * Partnership with other institutions/groups * Positive press coverage & social media * Name that reflects our product * Future sustainability and resources * New revenue options	Examples:  * Changing Regulations * Lack of support from government leaders * Cyber attacks/ dependent on technology * Negative press and social media * Customer complaints

Figure 9: SWOT Examples

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### SWOT Procedure and Process

PUD followed a standard method to collect information during the SWOT analysis:

- Conducted SWOT meetings with all divisions from July through November 2021
- Defined SWOT elements for each group, with examples (Figures 8 and 9)
- Facilitated by the Water Conservation Coordinator (WCC) and Senior Water Resources Planner (SWRP)
- Each meeting was between 60 and 90 minutes long
- WCC and SWRP both took notes, either on paper or on a white board
- The option was offered to all participants to submit feedback on a form anonymously if they did not feel comfortable speaking aloud
- Participants took a survey on a potential name change
- Raw data collected and sorted on a worksheet, and shared anonymously with PUD leaders
- Self-Assessment data was collected by hard copy and compiled
- Analyzed all data for significant trends and suggestions for immediate improvement as noted in the next section
- Discussed opportunity to change the department name in each meeting

### SWOT Results

The top Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats received by participants were examined and labeled for long-term or “quick fixes” to apply immediately to make improvements for the greater good. These are listed below.

The following “quick fixes” for Opportunities were offered; many of which have been addressed or applied:

- Improve facility security at the water plant to prevent the homeless population or unauthorized people from entering (patrol officer and fencing)
- Improve facility security at the Water Reclamation Facility (WRF) plants (patrol officer and repair fencing)
- Provide employee assistance for using computers as needed (Amazon offers \$7 laminated cheat sheets)
- Provide safety supplies such as disinfecting wipes, sanitizer, and toilet seat covers, etc. in our facilities (teams have since shared resources)
- Offer CityWorks training for divisions to support each other, and self-support
- Review schedules and shifts for improvements and/or rewards
- Update cohesive uniform and exam policies



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- Update recorded phone message information
- Create penalty/policy for contract vendors that destroy a meter, interrupt services, and/or leave area in a “lesser-than” condition after working near ACC water infrastructure



To follow are the SWOT results based on interviews with staff. Based on these results, managers and staff later defined areas of focused strategic improvements.

Note that some items listed below have since been addressed by the PUD and/or ACC.

### STRENGTHS

The top strengths, according to our PUD participants, are:

- Skilled/ Knowledgeable Staff / Years of Service
- Work Well Together / Teamwork / Good People/ Unity
- (Great) Customer Service
- Cross Training and/or collaboration with other divisions
- Good Friendship / Good People/ Family Environment / Good Work Environment
- Leadership / Great Management
- Dedicated Employees
- Award-Winning People and Facilities/ excellent product
- Communication
- Hard Workers / Hard Working

## Public Utilities Department Strategic Plan (FY2023-2025)

### WEAKNESSES

The top weaknesses, according to our PUD participants, are:

- Need more competitive pay
- Communication needs improving
- Invest more into training
- No succession planning
- Understaffed
- Some technology is outdated

### OPPORTUNITIES

The top opportunities, according to our PUD participants, are:

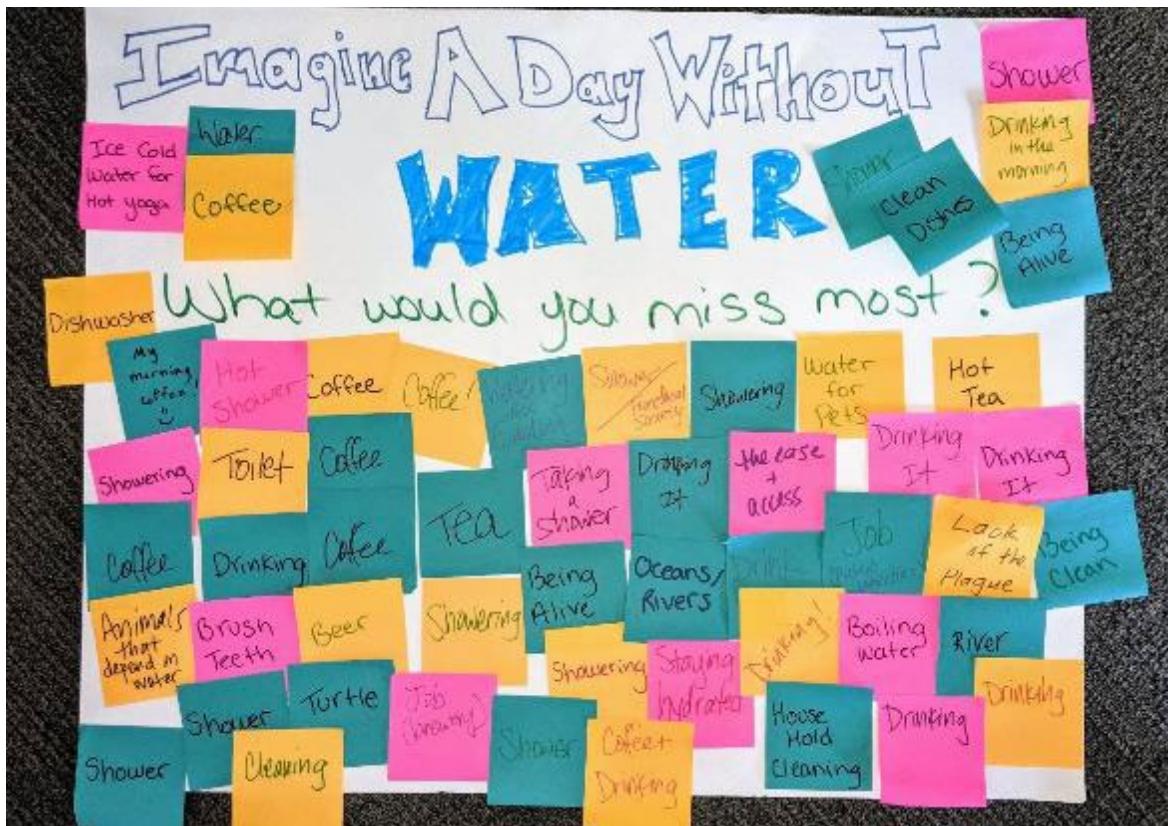
- Create/Improve Opportunities for Advancement
- Accountability of damage to critical infrastructure
- Robust and connected asset management plan
- Improve Onboarding Process
- Education and/or Training Across the Organization

### THREATS

The top threats, according to our PUD participants, are:

- COVID-19 Illnesses
- Retaining Staff
- Invest More in Training
- Supply Chain Issues
- Extra Security at Facilities





## OVERALL TRENDS IN SWOT FEEDBACK & SOLUTIONS

Throughout the SWOT analysis meetings many of the same topics arose across discussions. These topics are summarized below. This Strategic Plan addresses these topics, to fully or partially correct the SWOT findings.

## Department Employee Development

The ACC PUD employees are our community's unsung heroes. Historically, career growth opportunities were few because of a low turnover rate in personnel, and a lack of official employee development policies.

In 2018, the WRF and WTP superintendents created a career ladder policy for plant operators, which proved unsuccessful. Most positions do not offer opportunity for pay increases even though a person has certifications and/or decades of experience. Many employees expressed a lack of communication from leaders regarding what is needed for career advancement, resulting in employees feeling “stuck” despite having worked decades for the county.

## Public Utilities Department Strategic Plan (FY2023-2025)

Currently, employee development opportunities are not available to all division employees. Additionally, more training is needed; onboarding and SOPs are lacking, so some feel like they are thrown into the job without help. In the future, cross-training between divisions could offer an opportunity for employee advancement and offer critical support to crews in need of additional personnel when crews need help.

Management staff is working with the Human Resources Department on workforce development to offer leadership opportunities based on license, certification and training completed. Each division will have varying requirements and will be addressed as such.

### Salary, Pay Increases, and Hazard Pay

The water industry has been called the silent industry, as operators and staff work around the clock 365 days a year behind the scenes. Many employees worked on site, every day through the pandemic. These employees were still waiting on any reward or hazard pay (summer and fall 2021), while witnessing other departments, such as police and fire, receive extra pay. There was no interruption in service during the pandemic, yet few thanked these employees who continued reporting to potentially hazardous work conditions, day and night. Some crews even worked in the collection system pipes (sewage) to continue services for our customers.

Compensation has been historically low, and each increase in benefits decreases any annual increase, which results in less pay for employees to take home each year. The low pay increases also do not keep up with actual Cost of Living Adjustments (COLA), inflation or wage compression. Compared to other nearby municipalities, ACC pay is perceived to be low.

In December 2021 employees were given a retention bonus and all divisions received hazard pay. Additionally, In June 2022, the Mayor & Commission approved the budget for Fiscal Year 2023 (FY23). Included in the budget is an approved 7% increase for COLA, and 2% for the Performance Management Process (PMP). In addition, four (4) additional holidays were added to the ACCGov calendar.

### Internal Communication

Each ACC PUD employee is a valuable team member. They are the face of our utility, and our community trusts and depends upon our internal experts to tell the story of our shared waters. Our employees reported that the sharing of internal information can be improved. Internal communications breakdown when the leaders communicate through many levels and expect information to be passed through the ranks. Leaders should try direct communication to all. Other teams lack a leader and are trying to make things work but need assistance.



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On the other side, some teams shared that, as a result of the pandemic and working with skeleton crews, internal communications have improved in their division. Many teams have improved their internal communication, learned to communicate new ways as a result of the pandemic and working in skeleton crews.

PUD is committed to providing opportunities for employee engagement while establishing clear and consistent messaging across the department. An Internal Communication Plan (ICP) offers a continual two-way flow of information to improve workforce retention, acquisition, and productivity. The ICP will create a positive culture of participation and build pride amongst staff while providing our community with a vital service.

Since 2021, the Water Conservation Coordinator has been working to create the department's internal communication plan, guided by a two-year Certified Public Communicator program offered through Texas Christian University (TCU). This plan offers a continual two-way flow of information to improve the workforce's retention, acquisition, and productivity. The plan will create a positive culture of participation and build pride amongst staff while continuing to provide our community with a vital service.

### Communication, External Advocacy

Employees expressed that there is an opportunity to both educate our department staff and the public by sharing more of what we do. A proactive education and outreach effort could be added to the departmental goals. In addition, PUD teams identified a need for employee advocates within ACC. This person would prioritize employee interests to the decision makers of the county, and emphasize the value of each PUD employee. Many suggested an advocate position for each department.

PUD will review different ways to further transparency and outreach to educate the ACC community. The new rate structure will be posted on the PUD website, with visual graphics to allow ratepayers to understand the cost of every day water use for things such as showers, washing clothes, watering the yard, and flushing their toilets. Additionally, ratepayers may review updates on recent linear projects, which are posted online.

### Attrition

Many county employees are leaving and it seems like no one is rewarding the ones who stay. PUD employees are operating on scaled back crews and teams leading to burnout and exhaustion. They need support. Some employees perceive that more responsibilities are given to each employee with the same or lower pay, with costs increasing.

There are waves of staff, including long-time employees, leaving with institutional knowledge, often referred to as "brain drain." No one is actively collecting the information and data, or training the remaining employees to take the seasoned employees place. We are losing



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potential hires because of low pay and/or extended processing times of new hires. Even internal promotions are taking four to six weeks.



The Human Resources department has since improved process times and assisted with new hire processes. A number of plant operators are cross-trained to fill in where shifts are needed. Additionally, the department is considering an internal “stay interview” or survey, versus waiting for an exit interview. This proactive effort will allow leaders to continue motivating employees with existing elements that are already successful in the department.

### Recognition and Awards

Many employees expressed a desire to be recognized for their work during Covid. In 2021, employees were given hazard pay and a retention bonus, and many remote and flex-time opportunities were available. PUD leaders continue to plan appreciative rewards, such as division lunches during safety meetings or to celebrate a facility achievement. Other items, such as drinking tumblers, clothing, hats, tee shirts, etc., can be purchased if the budget allows. Leaders recognize that it is important to reward the superheroes of our community; who provided clean water without any disruptions.

### Department Name Change

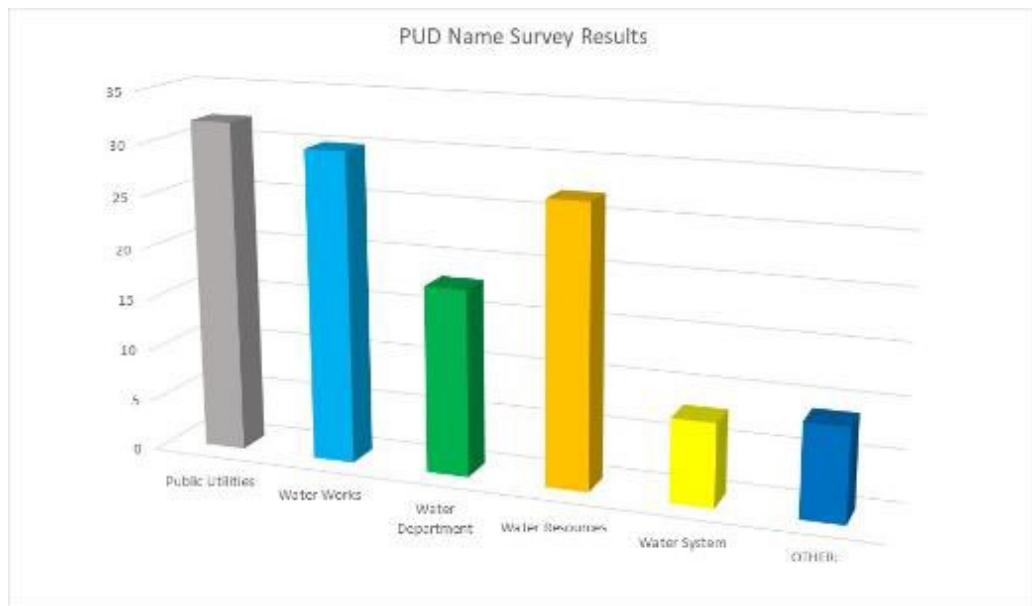
The Public Utilities Department recognizes that its name, “Public Utilities,” can be misleading since not all ratepayers understand that our public utilities team provides services related to water and water treatment only. One solution to better education and outreach concerning water conservation, information and value could be changing our department name. During a

## Public Utilities Department Strategic Plan (FY2023-2025)

name change event, the department would have the opportunity to share information regarding valuable services to the public.

During the SWOT analysis, each participant took a survey to consider whether the department should keep its current name, or change it. Respondents of the survey could choose from multiple choice department name options or submit their own suggestion. Each division submitted their input and the results were calculated equally without adjusting for the size of each division's voting power. The unweighted results found "Public Utilities" earned the most votes, with "Water Works" two votes behind, and "Water Resources" five votes behind to round out the top three. Other choices included "Water Department" and "Water System" as well as "Water Authority." Figure 10 displays the non-weighted survey results.

Management will consider a name change carefully. Such a change rollout will offer a prodigious opportunity for departmental outreach and education to customers, but will also require detailed planning to complete it successfully.



**Figure 10: Name Change Survey**



## **WATER BUSINESS OFFICE CUSTOMER SURVEY**

In addition to the SWOT activities, staff reviewed feedback from a recent Water Business Office Audit, compiled from the ACCGov's Operational Analysis Office. The raw data and summary report was used to gather community feedback. During the current compilation of the strategic plan, no additional external information was gathered. A future customer survey will be administered to compare benchmark goals with future achievements.

In 2020 the Operational Analysis Office (OAO) completed an audit of the Water Business Office (WBO) division. As part of this audit, the OAO conducted a customer survey in 2018. The majority of the feedback from this survey included 97.4 residential customers. Of these customers, approximately 59.7% of the respondents are property owners and 39.2% rent their residences. The 130-page report aligns with strategic objectives that have been in place, or are included within the future strategic objective focus for the next three years.

This section summarizes several of the key findings of the survey. It's important to note that in 2017 PUD conducted an internal SWOT, and identified areas for improvement for the WBO services. At this time, PUD had already taken action to address several elements noted in the survey. When this is the case, the improvements are included in the summary of the feedback that follows.

## Public Utilities Department Strategic Plan (FY2023-2025)

### Rate Structure Transparency

In 2008, the Mayor & Commission (M&C) adopted a new tiered-billing rate structure to incentivize water-efficient behaviors. The rate structure's complexities could make it difficult for the average customer to understand easily. The survey found this to be true, with only 54.9% of responders indicating they understood the rate structure used to calculate their water bill, and 45.1% did not.

The acting PUD Director, was tasked with returning to the 2019 M&C changes in the rate structure in the latter part of 2020. As a result of this study and acknowledgement of the potential economic hardships of the pandemic, the rate structure was adjusted. Tiered rate thresholds were widened, Annual Average data was adopted as part of the calculations, and the non-residential rates were updated to one uniform rate for all volumetric use.

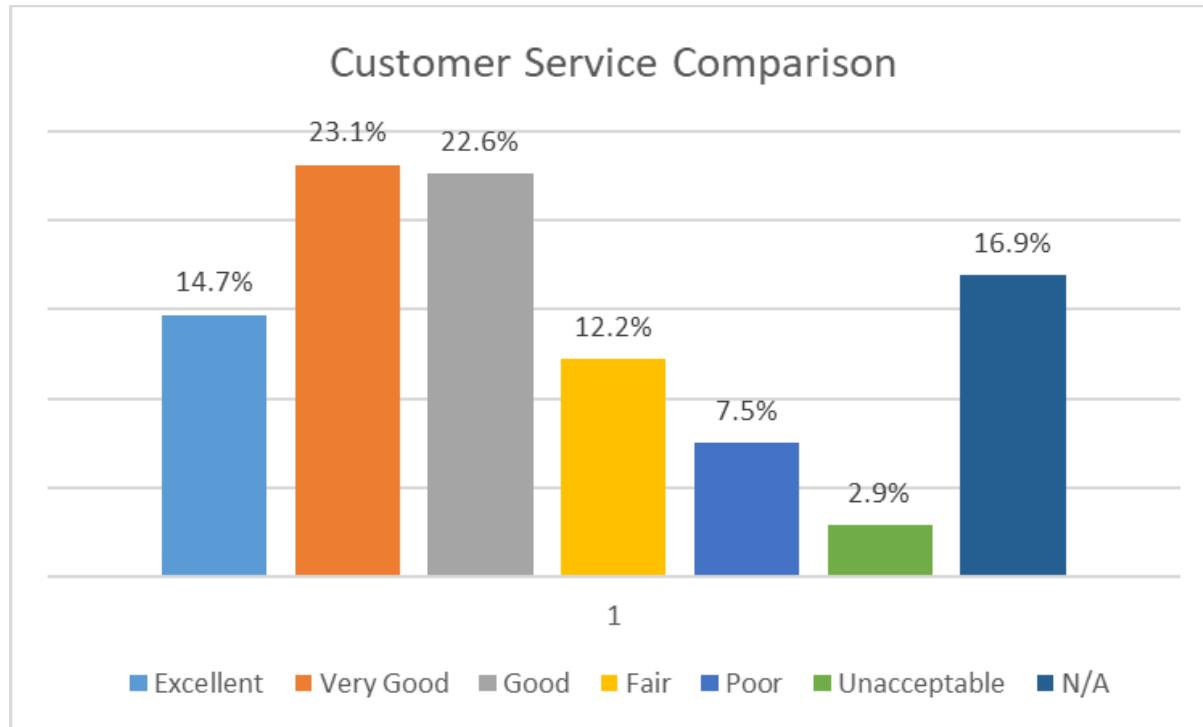
### Water Bill Payment Options

The survey queried five main payment option preferences for water and sewer bills. Results found 35.9% preferred to pay online with a debit card, 33.6% mailing in their payment, 32.6% making payments in person, 27.5% paying with a bank draft, and 8.4% using the after-hours drop boxes. When queried on how important is to pay the monthly water bill online, the majority of responses noted that online payment was important, with 52.7% of the responders saying it was "Extremely Important" and 18.6% said it was "Very Important."

In 2020, the PUD added an online payment option and achieved the departmental goal to increase the number of electronic bill payments. The PUD also fully supports paperless billing as a customer choice. Work to achieve the goal was on track prior to the audit, but there is more to accomplish. The utility's cost of accepting remote credit card payments from those that elect that particular payment method to all customers regardless of payment type is increasing.

### Customer Service

Survey responders were asked to rate customer service at the ACC WBO compared to other water utility providers that they had previously dealt with. Mainly positive feedback was received in 60.4% of the responses. The complete list of responses are shown in Figure 11.



**Figure 11: ACC WBO Customer Service; Comparison**

Customer service training continues to be a topic of focus in team development. In addition, the PUD compiled a new Standard Operating Procedures policy, which began prior to the audit report. The WBO has instituted process changes that are within the boundary of delegated administrative authority, even as the new Policies and Procedures are moving to final documentation. Some proposed new policies and procedures for deliberate improvement entailed ordinance changes.

Also related to customer service improvement, bill accuracy and information transparency, PUD completed the transition to the Automated Meter Infrastructure (AMI) program in 2019. A February 2020 article in an American Water Works Association publication cites these benefits to AMI, all of which accrue to ACCGov ratepayers:

- “Near-instant access to hourly consumption data rather than the single monthly read available from manual read meters.”
- “Enhancements to customer service efficiency.”
- “AMI reduces the need for field personnel to obtain a manual read in response to move-out/in or customer service issue because of the near-instant access to hourly consumption data.”
- “The Customer Portal allows customers to track their consumption and receive automatic notifications for high usage via text or email.”

## Public Utilities Department Strategic Plan (FY2023-2025)

- “AMI provides reports to the utility for various items such as high consumption alerts, tamper alerts, usage on inactive meters, etc.”

### New Billing System

In November 2021, the PUD went to bid with a Request for Proposals (RFP) for a billing system consultant. Recognizing that such a large update would require specialized expertise, staff set up two phases to procure a new billing system. Phase one includes finding a consultant to help write the RFP for the new billing system software. Phase two will focus on finding a vendor for the new billing system update.

PUD had been awaiting a decision regarding the replacement of ACCGov’s Enterprise Resource Planning system (ERP) by the Finance Department. In February 2020, Mayor and Commission approved funding and acquisition of Tyler Munis government software as ACC’s financial system. The new financial software will allow any billing software change to avoid customer disruption or added expense during software integration.





## Strategic Plan

### FY23-25 Goals, Strategies & Initiatives

To follow are the Public Utilities Department's strategic goals for the Fiscal Year 2023 through 2025. A detailed excel spreadsheet in this report correlates each strategic goal to a water utility best practices attribute, as well as to a Mayor & Commission Strategic Goal Area.

Below is a summary of the top five strategic goals, strategies and initiatives that PUD has chosen for its three-year strategic focus.

#### **Goal 1. Produce clean, reliable and sustainable water to the community.**

##### Strategy 1A: Provide quality drinking water to customers.

- Meet or exceed regulatory compliance levels and requirements
- Maintain 30-day inventory of chemical & process supplies.
  - Milestone: Brine Tank Project Kick Off
- Utilize information from Water Quality Optimization study to implement suggested improvements, with EPD approval.

#### **Goal 2. Maintain and improve service resilience to ensure sustainability.**

##### Strategy 2A: Design and construct water supply sufficiency for future generations.

- Analyze water demands for next 50+ years to design quarry phasing.
- Analyze large customer water demands for next 50+ years to design and connect recycled water infrastructure.

##### Strategy 2B: Implement green/sustainable infrastructure and planning where possible.

- Research new initiatives for alternative energy production.
- Partner with Office of Sustainability and other stakeholders as new opportunities arise.

#### **Goal 3. Improve customer satisfaction and engagement.**

##### Strategy 3A: Improve customer awareness and transparency of billing process.

- Procure professional consultant to guide billing and customer information software replacement process.





## Strategic Plan

### FY23-25 Goals, Strategies & Initiatives

- Create opportunities for customer feedback after each interface event.

#### Strategy 3B: Improve internal customer relations and communications.

- Create internal communications plan for department, including internal channel for employee feedback.
- Utilize front line team to implement plan.

## Goal 4. Improve opportunities for employee leadership and development.

#### Strategy 4A: Create internal workforce development program.

- Promote employees where possible (based on certification, license, qualification, training, etc.)
- Internal audit for each division.
- Conduct “stay” interviews with employees.

#### Strategy 4B: Invest in improving and maintaining employee core competencies.

- Create opportunities for cross-training, training, mentorship and other forms of leadership and succession planning.
- Invest in software and process improvements to increase employee efficiency.

## Goal 5. Improve operational optimization.

#### Strategy 5A: Lower electric costs of water service to customers.

- Address opportunities identified in the WTP energy assessment to improve efficiency and reduce energy costs where possible.
- Rehabilitate and/or replace aging equipment.

#### Strategy 5B: Improve and streamline facility processes.

- Implement CityWorks for vertical (facility) assets.
- Invest in automated and process improvements to optimize plant efficiency.



## Public Utilities Department Strategic Plan (FY2023-2025)

### APPENDIX A: EUM Self-Assessment Tool

Below are the steps and descriptions that the division superintendents of Public Utility Department used in their Effective Utility Management (EUM) self-assessment tool.

#### Step 1: Assess Current Level of Achievement

Using the blank worksheet in Appendix B, assess current conditions by rating your utility's systems and approaches and current level of achievement for each Attribute, using a 1 (high achievement) to 5 (low achievement) scale. Consider the degree to which your current management systems effectively support each of the Attributes and their component parts. Consider all components of each Attribute and gauge your rating accordingly. Use these descriptions to guide your rating. You will note that each Attribute has several components represented by the bullet points listed for each.

Your rating can either reflect the lowest level of achievement of all of the bullet points for that Attribute (for example, if you believe that your achievement in one of the bullet points for that Attribute was "5," but another bullet point you rated as "2," your rating for achievement under that Attribute would be "5"), or an average across all of the bullet points for that Attribute. For whatever approach you choose to use when rating, make sure to be consistent in this approach across all Attributes.

Rating	Description
1.	Effective, systematic approach and implementation; consistently achieve goals.
2.	Workable systems in place; mostly achieve goals.
3.	Partial systems in place with moderate achievement, but could improve.
4.	Occasionally address this when specific need arises.
5.	No system for addressing this.

#### Step 2: Rank Importance of Attributes

Rank the importance of each Attribute to your utility, based on your utility's vision, goals, and specific needs. The ranking should reflect the interests and considerations of all stakeholders (managers, staff, customers, regulators, elected officials, community and watershed interests, and others).

There are Ten Attributes. Considering long-term importance to your utility, rank the most important Attribute 1, the second most important 2, and so on. The least important Attribute would be ranked 10. Your ranking of each Attribute's importance may be influenced by current or expected challenges in that particular area, recent accomplishments in addressing these issues, or other factors. Importance ranking is likely to change over time as internal and external conditions change.



## Public Utilities Department Strategic Plan (FY2023-2025)

Attribute	Attribute Components
Product Quality (PQ)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meets or exceeds regulatory and reliability requirements.</li> <li>Operates consistent with customer, public health, economic, and ecological needs.</li> </ul>
Customer Satisfaction (CS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provides reliable, responsive, and affordable services.</li> <li>Receives timely customer feedback.</li> <li>Is responsive to customer needs and emergencies.</li> <li>Provides tailored customer service and outreach to a range of customer groups (e.g., residential, commercial, industrial, and newly emerging groups such as high-strength waste producers or power companies)</li> </ul>
Employee and Leadership Development (ED)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recruits, develops, and retains a competent, safety-focused workforce.</li> <li>Is a collaborative organization dedicated to continual learning, improvement, and adaptation.</li> <li>Implements procedures for institutional knowledge retention, workplace safety, and continual learning (e.g., standard operating procedures).</li> <li>Invests in/provides opportunities for professional and leadership development.</li> <li>Supports an integrated and well-coordinated senior leadership team.</li> </ul>
Operational Optimization (OO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conducts ongoing performance improvements informed by performance monitoring.</li> <li>Minimizes resource use and loss from day-to-day operations.</li> <li>Is aware of and adopts in a timely manner operational and technology improvements, including operational technology and information technology.</li> <li>Manages and utilizes data from automated and smart systems.</li> </ul>
Financial Viability (FV)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understands and plans for full life-cycle cost of utility.</li> <li>Effectively balances long-term debt, asset values, operations and maintenance expenditures, and operating revenues.</li> <li>Sets predictable and adequate rates to support utility current needs and plans to invest in future needs, taking into account affordability and the needs of disadvantaged households when setting rates.</li> <li>Understands opportunities for diversifying revenue and raising capital.</li> </ul>
Infrastructure Strategy and Performance (IS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understands the condition of and costs associated with critical infrastructure assets.</li> <li>Maintains and enhances assets over the long-term at the lowest possible life-cycle cost and acceptable risk.</li> <li>Coordinates repair efforts within the community to minimize disruptions.</li> <li>Plans infrastructure investments consistent with community needs, anticipated growth, system reliability goals, and with a robust set of adaptation strategies.</li> </ul>
Enterprise Resiliency (ER)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Works together with staff internally and coordinate with external partners to anticipate and avoid problems.</li> <li>Proactively establishes tolerance levels and effectively manages risks (including legal, regulatory, financial, environmental, safety, security, cyber, knowledge-loss, talent, and natural disaster-related).</li> <li>Plans for and actively manages to maintain business continuity.</li> </ul>

## Public Utilities Department Strategic Plan (FY2023-2025)

Attribute	Attribute Components
Community Sustainability (SU)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Actively leads in promoting and organizing improvements to community and watershed health within utility and with external community partners.</li><li>Actively leads in promoting welfare within the community for disadvantaged households.</li><li>Uses operations to enhance natural environment.</li><li>Efficiently uses water and energy resources, promotes economic vitality, and engenders overall community improvement.</li><li>Maintains and enhances ecological and community sustainability including pollution prevention, watershed and source water protection.</li></ul>
Water Resource Sustainability (WS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Ensures water availability through long-term resource supply and demand analysis, conservation, fit for purpose water reuse, integrated water resource management, watershed management and protection, and public education initiatives.</li><li>Manages operations to provide for long-term aquifer and surface water sustainability and replenishment.</li><li>Understands and plans for future water resource variability (e.g., changing weather patterns, including extreme events, such as drought and flooding).</li></ul>
Stakeholder Understanding and Support (SS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Engenders understanding and support from oversight bodies, community and watershed interests, and regulatory bodies for service levels, rate structures, operating budgets, capital improvement programs, and risk management decisions.</li><li>Actively engages in partnerships and involves stakeholders in the decisions that will affect them.</li><li>Actively promotes an appreciation of the true value of water and water services, and water's role in the social, economic, public and environmental health of the community.</li></ul>



## Public Utilities Department Strategic Plan (FY2023-2025)

### APPENDIX B: CURRENT KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

See Attachment 2: Key Performance Indicators worksheet (to be published with the FY24 PUD Annual Budget Request.



## Public Utilities Department Strategic Plan (FY2023-2025)

### APPENDIX C: LEADERSHIP TEAM & DIVISIONS



#### **Hollis Terry, Director**

Hollis Terry has worked for the Public Utilities Department since 2015. He has served in several roles as a Water Reclamation Superintendent, Environmental Engineer, and Assistant Director before his appointment as Interim Director.

Prior to joining the ACCGov Public Utilities Department, Mr. Terry worked in supervisory roles with public water reclamation facilities since 1999 with Gwinnett County, DeKalb County, and the City of Gainesville, Georgia. He holds a Georgia Wastewater Operator Class 1 certification and a Georgia

Water Operator Class 3 certification. Mr. Terry graduated from Strayer University with a BBA in Management. He is also a graduate of the Georgia Association of Water Professionals Leadership Academy in 2021.



#### **Hugh Ogle, Assistant Director**

Hugh Ogle has been a member of the Athens-Clarke County Public Utilities team over 30 years. He has served in several roles during his tenure in the divisions of Engineering Management, Water & Sewer, Meter Management and the Water Business Office.

Mr. Ogle is a member of GAWP, GRWA, AWWA and WEF. He holds several licenses and certifications in Water, Wastewater and Cross Connection. He is inducted into the Golden Hydrant and Golden Manhole Societies for significant contributions made for promoting professionalism and pride in the operation, maintenance, design, construction, management, education and training for the betterment of the distribution and collection systems in Athens-Clarke County.



#### **Sheridan Soileau, Senior Water Resources Planner**

Sheridan Soileau joined ACCGov in 2012, and has worked for the Public Utilities Department since 2015. She began as the Utilities Analyst, then was promoted to Planning, Budget and Research Coordinator, before taking on the roll as Senior Water Resources Planner in 2021.

A member of AWWA, GAWP, GGFOA, WateReuse and WEF, Mrs. Soileau has lived in Athens since 2006. Owning a brick and mortar business downtown was her true introduction to the local business, government, music and artist scene. She is a member of the 2023 WateReuse Conference planning committee, a volunteer for What Works Cities, a former Innovation Ambassador, and ELGL

Water Cohort. Mrs. Soileau has a Bachelor of Science from The Ohio University. She also completed numerous Analytics classes from JHU GovEx Academy, and the Grant Writing Program at UGA.

## Public Utilities Department Strategic Plan (FY2023-2025)

### APPENDIX D: FY 2019-22 MISSION STATEMENT & GOALS

*To follow are the PUD's historical FY9-22 Mission Statement, Goals and Strategic Objectives (submitted with the annual FY23 budget request).*

#### Mission Statement

Our staff is committed to providing an uninterrupted supply of safe drinking water for public health, fire protection and economic productivity, and to safely convey and recycle wastewater in an environmentally responsive way. We operate and manage an effective and reliable enterprise, and responsibly reinvest in public health and environmental protection infrastructure at value to our customers.

#### Goals

- Maintain the economic value of the public's water and sewer systems while improving its level of service
- Provide suitable technology to educate Athens-Clarke County citizens on environmental issues and to improve customer services
- Provide quality drinking water to protect and enhance the well-being of the citizens of Athens-Clarke County
- Maintain and improve the public water distribution and wastewater collection systems to meet the current and future needs of Athens-Clarke County.
- Adopt and /or expand new technology to provide efficient and improved operations, performance data and customer service
- Continue to safely recycle clean water from the wastewater system
- Upgrade wastewater treatment to achieve better water quality and more beneficial reuse of residuals

#### Strategic Objectives

- Continue evaluation, replacement and/or rehabilitation of the public water transmission and distribution lines in a priority order
- Continue evaluation, replacement and rehabilitation of the public wastewater trunk and interceptor lines, in a priority order
- Evaluate and modify as necessary the Water Conservation Program ensuring that environmental, economic and public outreach goals are achieved
- Maintain water and sewer rates at affordable levels
- Continue utilization of the Wastewater Flow Monitoring Program to prioritize infiltration / inflow reduction
- Implement a non-potable recycle system to improve water supply resilience and reliability

### Strategic Objectives (Continued)

- Implement water transmission line grid improvements to reduce impact of potential water service interruptions
- Initiate a three-year strategic plan to improve the department and the utility system's performance and accountability
- Install tertiary treatment at two of the Water Reclamation Facilities (WRF) and Class A biosolids Program at the North Oconee WRF

