

**SECOND TAXING DISTRICT COMMISSIONERS**

Special Meeting Minutes

April 1, 2020

Present:	David Westmoreland Maria Borges-Lopez Robert Burgess Mary Mann Sandra Stokes	Chairperson Vice Chairperson
Absent:	Harold Bonnet Martha Wooten-Dumas	
Also Present:	Steve Sax Lisa Roland Kara Murphy, Esq. Frank Murphy, Esq. Alan Huth Eric Strom Lori Walker Scott Murphy Gwen Gonzalez Tom Orgovan Connie Luis	Interim General Manager District Clerk Tierney, Zullo, Flaherty & Murphy Tierney, Zullo, Flaherty & Murphy Director of Water Operations Director of Customer Care Director of Finance Director of Electric Operations Collections Specialist IT Manager Clerical Assistant
Public Present:	none	

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*The meeting was recorded up in its entirety.*

**Call To Order:**

Commissioner Westmoreland called the Special Meeting of The Second Taxing District to order at 7:02 p.m. on Wednesday, April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020. The meeting was held via Web Video Conference Call originating in Fairfield County, Connecticut.

*Public Participation: None*

1. Management Update: Coronavirus Planning

Steve Sax gave a brief overview. A couple of weeks ago Commissioner Westmoreland had asked for a Special Meeting to be held to discuss what SNEW is doing to keep business going while also protecting its workforce. Steve Sax gave the floor to Scott Murphy, who had been charged with leading SNEW's Corona Virus planning.

Scott Murphy presented a 'high-level' overview of actions taken thus far:

- **February 28<sup>th</sup>** – first COVID-19 awareness memo is distributed to all employees via email.

- **March 12<sup>th</sup>** – offered an online Corona Virus training course through SNEW’s Safety Skills Training platform.
- **March 17<sup>th</sup>** – A Health and Safety Hygiene Bulletin is distributed to all employees, as well as posted in the Customer Service Lobby.
  - After that, Accounting increased their efforts to virtualize accounts payable process to minimize employee contact.
  - Then decided to suspend all non-essential work and in-home troubleshooting calls along with suspending all vendor and customer visitation.
  - In addition, Purell hand sanitizer and Clorox disinfecting wipes are distributed to each employee. Customer Service representatives have been provided with latex gloves.
- **March 18<sup>th</sup>** – SNEW Health and Safety Committee held a Meeting to address employee concerns and hazards.
- **March 20<sup>th</sup>** – reduced the Customer Service Lobby hours to minimize employee/public contact.
- **March 23<sup>rd</sup>** – posted SNEW’s response to COVID-19 on our website.
- **Week of March 23<sup>rd</sup>** – started a modified work schedule with staggered shifts and allowed some employees to work from home.
- **Week of March 30<sup>th</sup>** – Accounting Department modified their work schedule and will utilize Zoom platform to minimize employee contact.
- **March 31<sup>st</sup>** – began operating with only one Customer Service window open because the two windows are spaced at only 3.5’ apart which would not allow adherence to the social distancing guidelines of 6’. Additionally, the customer service lobby floor was marked with tape to identify proper spacing between customers.
- **Both Water & Electric** have been sanitizing their own facilities, along with their vehicles, daily.
- Every effort is being made to allow only one occupant in a company vehicle.
- Every effort is being made to minimize the delivery of inter-office mail.
- Cell phone sanitizing machines were purchased for 1 State Street and 164 Water Street.
- Just recently the State Street Break Room will be limited to only one person at a time.
- Just recently the Water Street Break Room will be limited to only 2 people at a time.
- COVID-19 regular item on weekly Directors’ Meeting Agenda.
- This list is going to continue to grow and the virus is ongoing. We will continue to monitor all Federal, State and local government recommendations, and modify our operational procedures as needed.
- Virus is very contagious, and the safety of our employees and customers is first priority.
- Nearly 20% of workforce is either out sick or caring for others that are sick.
- Employees generally positive, but there has been an increased level of anxiety as the virus hits closer to home. Some employees have family members that have contracted the virus and/or have lost their lives to the virus.
- 4 customers known to have been lost to virus.
- Over the next few weeks, we will be closely monitoring our response to the virus and

change what needs to be changed.

More specifically, the Electric Department's response has been:

- Check/ensure sufficient inventory in case there is a supplier issue.
- Stagger employee shifts.
- Ensure plenty of fuel.
- Taking one day at a time.
- Mutual assistance is available if needed.

Alan Huth presented the Water Department's response.

- Attend two weekly webinars with the Department of Public Health and all other major water suppliers in Connecticut. One webinar is specifically aimed at water quality and while the other is focused on operations.
- Implemented a pandemic response before March 23<sup>rd</sup>.
- Only one operator in at a time on a daily rotating shift.
- Only one lab employee in at a time on a daily rotating shift.
- On 3/24, all chemicals and fuel levels full.
- No one sick on operations side. If someone should fall sick, the 3-person rotation becomes a 2-person rotation.
- One person per vehicle.
- Remaining grounds employee is being used for security duties at the various water related sites.
- Prepared to provide storm cleanup should that need arise.
- Two employees out on the M&C side. One person directly affected by COVID-19.
- Leak repair services still being maintained.
- Mutual aid agreement in the works.
- Vendor visits suspended except for deliveries.

Eric Strom presented the Customer Care Department's response:

- Meter readers work independently.
- Any in-home work has been suspended except for emergencies.
  - Only one employee has been tasked with the emergency in-home work and has been provided with a mask and gloves. However, the mask is being reused as supply of these is not plentiful.
- On the Customer Service side, main goal in addition to keeping the business running is social distancing of our employees and customers.
  - Increased the spacing of the seating within customer service area – one desk is not being used.
  - One window is not being used.
  - Two employees going home in the afternoons at the same time the window is closed to provide for more social distancing.
- Customer window open 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. everyday M-F.
- Virtual boxes taped off on the customer service lobby floor to indicate where customers should stand.
- Only 4 customers allowed in the lobby at one time, with recommended distancing

guidelines posted

- Distancing in the lobby may be an issue later next week during discount payment period.
- Signage in the lobby.
- Email blast to 7500 customers.
- Website and social media posts.
- Cleaning of the inside and outside 'dirty' window zone every two hours.
- Gloves to be used only in dirty zones. Must be removed in clean zones.
- There are a lot of options on how to make remote payments, but the window remains open because many customers still only use cash.
- A payment Kiosk has been ordered and arriving sometime next week. It will take cash, check and credit card payments but will not make/return change. Installation logistics will need to be worked out. It will take time to setup each payment type, with cash and checks being the first to set up.
- The Kiosk will be a permanent installation.

Lori Walker presented the Finance Department's response:

- Plenty of cash reserves on hand
- Work force maintaining and reinforcing social distancing practices that had already been implemented prior to pandemic.
- Pushing on virtualization of invoice processing.
- Employees on staggered hours.
- Plans to implement skeleton staff if needed.

Lisa Roland presented the facilities' response:

- Facilities maintenance employee is doing a great job – he is a knowledgeable and experienced individual. He has been instructed to clean/sanitize more often throughout his shift, including the lobby area just before the end of his day.

Commissioner Stokes asked how everyone was doing on a more personal level. Scott Murphy responded that everyone was well but mentioned a concern some are having that adds to overall anxiety. That is, if self-quarantine became necessary, meeting responsibilities at home such as caring for children or elderly parents becomes very difficult. Commissioner Stokes said that she knew she could speak on behalf of all the Commissioners that the health and safety of every single employee is a priority. She continued that there are a lot of mandates and policies put in place by the Governor and by the Mayor of Norwalk; that the District wants to ensure the safety of the residents of Norwalk and that there are resources for them; but, also, that the safety, health and well-being of the employees is [the District's] top priority. She thanked everyone for all of their efforts to this end.

Steve Sax also thanked everyone for their efforts tackling various issues aimed at keeping employees safe. Sometimes there was an easy fix, sometimes not. He also mentioned he has been feeling ill as of Friday [3/37/20] night and went to a Rapid Care Center in Tennessee on Monday to have his symptoms evaluated. He has 2 or 3 of the 5 COVID-19

symptoms, but nothing was confirmed nor denied. He will be taking 14 days off and will return if all is well at the end of that period.

Commissioner Westmoreland spoke that all the municipal utilities, although not mandated, are voluntarily complying with the PURA recommendations that shutoffs for non-payment be temporarily suspended.

Eric Strom provided an update on how he envisioned late- and non-payments would be handled during the coronavirus pandemic.

- The mandate ends April 15<sup>th</sup>, while our next shutoff is for Water on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, and Electric is about a week after.
- He expects PURA will extended beyond mid-April, and thus he expects no shutoffs will take place for a while longer.
- Implementation of a pre-paid payment plan might be in order and would be a new rate plan for SNEW.
- SNEW will continue to send delinquency/shutoff notices so that customers know their status.
- The notices will have a date for shutoff.

Commissioner Westmoreland asked if the wording of the notices could be changed so as not to scare the customers with a shutoff that may not happen. Eric Strom stated that the notice could be modified although not so easily as previously as it is no longer an internal document. The change to the wording will require a change notice to be implemented by NISC.

Commissioner Stokes interjected that in these unique and dire times, the District needs to be creative and flexible, and she would encourage that the language be modified to be more sensitive to the financial circumstances of our customers.

Commissioner Westmoreland agreed that the District needs to extend the shutoff deadline beyond PURA's date and to modify the wording of the letter to something more applicable for the next few months.

Commissioner Borges-Lopez added her thanks and well wishes to all of the staff. Additionally, she agreed that an extended grace period was warranted and desired. Commissioner Borges-Lopez also had a question for Lori Walker regarding the CARES Act. She wanted to know if the District could qualify/apply for small business loans, specifically the paycheck protection program, as well as programs assisting in the payment of rent and [business interruption] insurance. Lori Walker answered that she was looking into the details of the loans with some skepticism because the terms sounded too good to be true and asked if she could consult with Commissioner Borges-Lopez at a later time/date.

Commissioner Stokes encouraged use of the State of Connecticut website for daily updates on all matters related to COVID-19 best practices and information.

Scott Murphy added that the State of Connecticut website recently added guidelines

addressing essential employees that SNEW should explore and research. The guideline states that to the extent possible, employees of essential businesses performing non-critical business duties/tasks should telecommute or utilize any work from home procedures available to them.

At the weekly Directors' meetings, SNEW utilizes and shares information regarding COVID-19 from several sources such as the Department of Public Health, State of Connecticut, FEMA, Department of Labor, APA etc.

Kara Murphy added that she has been in contact with Lisa Roland and Lori Walker regarding the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA).

Commissioner Westmoreland addressed Eric Strom regarding extension of the discount period as the discount drives significant traffic at the customer window. The Commissioner suggested extending the period and posting signs in the lobby windows. Eric Strom responded that the discount period has already been extended to the end of the month, April 30<sup>th</sup>, but that it wouldn't be publicized – it wouldn't be posted on the website nor would email notices be sent out. Signs will be posted in- and outside the lobby.

Commissioner Westmoreland asked if people are directed to the night box. Eric Strom responded that they are except for cash payments.

Eric Strom asked if the water bills going out the end of this week should contain the notice regarding the water rate increase hearings as originally intended. It is rather bad timing for an increase but if notices do not go out this month, implementation of the water rate increase would be pushed out another month.

Both Commissioners Westmoreland and Stokes agreed the increase would have to wait. Lori Walker reminded everyone that the Water Fund budget is extremely tight and is dependent upon the water rate increase of 4.75% being implemented on time. Commissioner Stokes continued that it isn't business as usual right now and the District has to show flexibility and sensitivity to the current circumstances. Commissioner Westmoreland stated the issue would be revisited next month.

Kara Murphy added that the State recently allowed for public meetings for municipalities and other governmental agencies to be conducted via web video conferencing. The budget process may also be completed in this fashion by posting the budget to the website, allowing for comments to be submitted online via email or live during the meeting, and then holding an electors' meeting via web video conferencing. The deadline has been extended by 30 days. Commissioner Westmoreland will have to decide when he would like to start the comment period.

Commissioner Westmoreland's inclination was to move the budget ahead although he felt that missing the deadline would not be the end of the world. He did suggest that possibly Lori Walker would like to discuss with Steve Sax the implications of delaying the water rate increase a few months and to adjust the numbers accordingly. He stated that the budget is just a plan and plans sometimes change.

Commissioner Mann thanked the staff.

Commissioner Burgess asked that all the Commissioners and the Treasurer be provided with masks if the District had extra. The response from several staff members was that they were difficult to come by and there weren't any "extra" per se. Steve Sax committed to provide what we could.

Commissioner Stokes thanked the staff and encourage all to remain safe.

**Adjournment**

Commissioner Borges-Lopez moved to adjourn. Commissioner Stokes seconded.

*The meeting adjourned at 7:55 p.m.*

Attest:

Lisa G. Roland  
District Clerk