



CITY OF HOUSTON

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The Honorable Philip Cortez
Chair Urban Affairs
Texas State House
PO Box 2910
Austin, Texas 78711-2910

RE: City of Houston Testimony on House Urban Affairs Committee Interim Charge No. 4

Good morning, Chairman Cortez, Vice Chair Holland, and esteemed Committee members:

My name is Sharon Citino, and I am the Planning Director for Houston Water, a service line within Houston Public Works. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today on Interim Committee Charge No. 4. I'll provide an overview of what Houston Water is doing to ensure reliable water and wastewater infrastructure and continuous services, especially during severe weather events. I'll also share my thoughts for how you can help Houston Water and other municipal water providers across the state to become more resilient, sustainable utilities.

I'd like to begin by explaining why Houston Water is laser focused on resiliency and sustainability.

Between 2015 and 2020, the greater Houston region experienced devastation and loss from six federally-declared flood disasters, most notably Hurricane Harvey in 2017. These events got our attention and made it clear to our elected officials and City staff our need to find a way to get through, bounce back, and build better for the long-term health and well-being of our citizens and our economy.

In early 2020, the City of Houston released two plans to help us do that.

The first plan, Resilient Houston, is a framework for collective action that links existing City efforts with new ones in order to protect Houston against future shocks, such as hurricanes and flood events, as well as chronic stressors, such as aging infrastructure, poor air quality, and climate change.

The second plan, the Climate Action Plan, is a science-based, community and industry-driven strategy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in four areas – Transportation, Energy Transition, Building Optimization, and Materials Management – in order to become carbon neutral by 2050 and still remain the Energy Capitol of the World.

Together, these plans established goals, strategies, and actions that focus the City's investments and efforts to become a more resilient, sustainable city.

Two emergencies occurred that reinforced the plans' relevance to Houston Water and their importance to the long-term health and well-being of our community.

The Covid-19 Pandemic drastically impacted our community and our workforce. Houston Water made real-time adjustments to protect the health and safety of the City's essential workers, who operate the plants and systems that deliver safe drinking water and wastewater services to our community.

Winter Storm Uri triggered widespread power outages across Texas, including Houston, interfering with our ability to deliver drinking water and wastewater services for several days.

Combined, these events highlighted to our stakeholders the importance of Houston Water as an essential service: we need water to drink, to wash our hands to protect ourselves from getting sick, and to flush our toilets.

If Houston Water is to meet its mission and provide these essential services, we must work to become a more resilient, sustainable utility. This will require more than traditional approaches to utility service delivery, staffing, planning, and funding. We will need to think bigger, collaborate more, invest more, strive for equity, and engage with our community in a meaningful and ongoing way on issues related to water. We will need to be open to new technologies, and new ways to leverage data. We will need to be creative and flexible in our planning, providing road maps and tools for future decision-makers who will need to address future shocks and stressors, including those that are unpredictable.

In response to the lessons we learned during the Pandemic and Winter Storm Uri, Houston Water has done the following to ensure reliable infrastructure and uninterrupted utility services:

- Strengthened and practiced emergency communications, preparedness, and protocols.
- Trained and equipped field staff to safely navigate flooded streets and infrastructure.
- Worked to add more mobile backup generators to support groundwater wells, repump stations, and other system assets that don't have stationary backup power.
- Worked to add stationary natural gas generators for resilience.
- Partnered with CenterPoint Energy to identify critical facilities and establish priority for power restoration.
- Partnered with Enchanted Rock to install a natural gas-powered microgrid at our soon-to-be largest surface water plant facility.
- Developed more efficient and effective messaging and communication tools to better inform our community on how to prepare for emergencies and notify them of emergencies that impact their services.
- Adopted new water and wastewater rates that provide funding for resiliency and sustainability projects.

Moving forward, we will do more:

- Continue to identify and implement practices and procedures that allow for continuity of services during extreme weather events.
- Identify skills needed to operate and maintain green stormwater infrastructure and advanced water treatment technologies, and attract, develop, and retain our workforce to build those skills.
- Work with regional partners to study and develop new strategies, technologies, and opportunities for collaboration to ensure reliable services to critical sectors across the greater Houston region.
- Develop an integrated set of strategic master plans for the City's water, wastewater, and stormwater utilities using a One Water approach that aligns with Resilient Houston and the Climate Action Plan. This One Water Plan will enhance our existing planning efforts by integrating consideration of: current and future climate impacts; diversity, equity and inclusion in utility project planning, service delivery, and staffing; ways to enhance our stewardship of the natural environment; and opportunities for ongoing education and engagement with our community on water issues.

Houston Water is grateful for the financial support we receive from the State Legislature and the Texas Water Development Board. Municipal water providers cannot provide essential services without your legislative assistance, grants, and the no-interest and low-interest loans you provide that help us finance our projects.

We also appreciate the State Legislature's efforts to understand the events that occurred during Winter Storm Uri and the impact of those events on municipal water providers. Looking forward, I hope the State Legislature will continue to engage with municipal water providers to learn from our experiences so that you have a clear understanding of our needs, and work with us to provide these essential services 24 hours a day, 365 days a year to our constituents.

There is no single solution to these complex challenges. As an industry, we continue to learn new practices and develop new technologies. As municipalities, we have different needs and opportunities based on our populations, industries, and geographies. I encourage you to continue to put forth legislation that focuses on outcomes, rather than one-size-fits-all solutions that only help a few. This flexibility will help provide reliable infrastructure and uninterrupted water and wastewater services to our communities now, and for many years to come.

Thank you for your time.

Sharon Citino
Planning Director
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City of Houston