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EWEB seeks public feedback on electric vehicle charging, flexible rates

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Eugene Water & Electric Board wants input on whether and how the utility can encourage electric vehicle adoption and implement demand response, a system of incentivizing electricity use during off-times.

The utility is seeking "any and all feedback on these topics" including whether the standards should be adopted in whole, in part or not at all, Aaron Orlowski, spokesperson for EWEB, said.

"At a higher level, this is also an opportunity for community members to weigh in on EWEB's vision for electric vehicles and demand response," Orlowski said.

The federal government has issued recommended standards in both areas under the Public Utility Regulatory Policies Act. In a memo, staff said both are "appropriate for EWEB but need clarification."

The demand response standard says utilities may "establish rate mechanisms for the timely recovery of the costs of promoting demand-response and demand flexibility."

Currently, EWEB residential electricity costs $23.50 per month plus 9.72 cents per kilowatt hour, regardless of the time of day electricity is used.

EWEB said in a press release that customers volunteering to cut back on energy during the late afternoon and early evening peaks of the August heat wave showed demand response's potential to flatten electricity usage.

The utility says this helps save money and reduce emissions, because EWEB can rely more on the electricity it produces and buy less from the open-market, which tends to be dirtier than EWEB's electricity, of which 10% comes from carbon-emitting sources.

EWEB said before it can follow-through, it needs to finish rolling out "smart meters," to accurately track energy usage at what times with all of its customers. Seventy percent of EWEB's customers have the smart metes and the utility predicts the remaining 30% will have them in early 2024.

Some EWEB commissioners said during an Oct. 3 meeting that they support the idea of demand response and the community response to the heat wave demonstrated its potential.

"We saw how during the heat wave, people voluntarily shut down," commissioner John Brown said. "This is a very responsive community," he said, predicting even more customers would reduce electricity use during peak hours if there was a financial incentive.

Other commissioners expressed concern that demand response could possibly hurt ratepayers.

"There's industries that can take advantage of demand response, but there's others that have no possibility to curtail their energy use," commissioner John Barofsky said. For example, "if we're looking at 5 to 7 (p.m.) as the time we want to curtail energy use, it's really difficult for the restaurant industry to curtail their energy when that's the peak time of making their business work."

The electric vehicles standard says utilities should "consider measures to promote greater electrification of the transportation sector," including promoting "affordable and equitable" EV infrastructure, reducing charging times, encouraging third-party investment in charging and recovering "marginal costs" of delivering electricity for charging.

EWEB currently offers several rebates for EV chargers, electric bikes and EV car sharing available to individuals and businesses as well as grants for public institutions and nonprofits to encourage EV adoption.

At the Oct. 3 EWEB meeting, commissioners expressed a desire to improve EV charging infrastructure in Eugene.

"In the ways that we can help get more (chargers) around the region, we absolutely need them," commissioner Sonya Carlson said.

To provide feedback on the two standards, send an email to aaron.yale-bush@eweb.org or physical mail to 4200 Roosevelt Blvd, Eugene, OR 97402 by Saturday, Oct. 14.

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