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Seattle Public Utilities employees fired after lowering their own bills

Two employees of Seattle Public Utilities have been fired for accessing their own utility accounts and lowering their bills.

By Lynn Thompson

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Two employees of Seattle Public Utilities have been fired for accessing their own utility accounts and lowering their bills.

The money lost to the utility is estimated to be less than \$2,000.

Ray Hoffman, director of the city utility, said an investigation is continuing. He said the actions of the two workers violate the city ethics code, which prohibits city workers from using their official positions for personal gain.

"We take the public's trust seriously, and expect our employees to follow the City's Ethics Code," Hoffman said in a statement. "We are committed to a full review of department procedures, and are taking steps to prevent this kind of misconduct from happening again."

Hoffman said the utility is working with city and state auditors to determine how the accounts were manipulated and whether anyone else was involved.

The utility also has hired its own investigator, he said. ←

The probe into billing irregularities began last November, said Andy Ryan, SPU spokesman.

The employees were fired in January and February, he said.

He declined to say whether the matter had been forwarded to either the Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission or the police.

The utility also refused to release the names of the employees.

In a similar case, an employee in the Mayor's Office for Senior Citizens was fined \$2,000 by the ethics commission in March for approving payments to her boyfriend and ex-husband from an energy-assistance fund meant for residents facing financial crisis.

The employee was fired. No criminal charges have been filed.

The Seattle Auditor's Office recently completed an audit of SPU's wastewater division. It also made preliminary inquiries related to an upcoming audit of the utilities' combined billing system with Seattle City Light.

Robin Howe, the auditor in charge of the city review, said its preliminary work found problems with the oversight of customer accounts.

"We identified the potential for problems, but SPU identified the actual problem," she said of the two employees' misuse of the billing system.

The utility has been working since March 2009 to create its own risk-management and quality-assurance division, Ryan said.

Seattle Public Utilities provides water to more than 1.3 million customers in the Seattle metropolitan area. The utility will bill an estimated \$596 million for water, wastewater, drainage and solid waste in 2011.

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