

## Appendix B – Community Research and Outreach Summary

### Purpose

Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) conducted research and community outreach to engage and learn from customers and community members as part of the 2025-2030 Strategic Business Plan (SBP) Update process.

Insights gathered will help the utility better understand customer and community perspectives and plan for the future. More specifically, this work will inform content and language in the SBP, ongoing SPU service delivery, and engagement with customers and the community.

The research and outreach process had several important, defining characteristics:

- **Purposeful and respectful of people’s time and opinions:** Community members and customers are often asked to share their opinions, but rarely know how their feedback is used (if at all). To demonstrate respect for people’s time and input, research and outreach tools were kept brief and made accessible.
- **Inclusive:** Recognizing that typical research and public input tools often underrepresent segments of the population, SPU made a deliberate effort to be inclusive in its outreach. Seattle Public Utilities with the help of Department of Neighborhoods’ Community Liaisons (CLs), took purposeful steps to better reach historically underserved and non-English speaking communities.
- **Multi-pronged:** Customers, community members, businesses, and SPU employees had multiple opportunities to provide input: through the careful mining of existing research, a statistically valid online survey, a brief community survey that was available in print and online, the SPU website, social media, meetings with community leaders, and interaction at events. Materials were translated into multiple languages to enhance accessibility.
- **Efficient and adaptive:** The research and engagement teams were mindful of utility and community investments (time, resources, and focus) and ensured outreach was strategic, concise, convenient, and valuable. Outreach was designed to provide accessible tools that allowed people to submit feedback in ways that maximize convenience.
- **Meeting the community where they are:** Engagement strategies were tailored to meet the needs of diverse communities. This involved language considerations, in-language outreach, strategic event selection, and understanding the unique preferences of different groups. This strategy aimed not only to disseminate information but also to cultivate a genuine understanding of the community's pulse.

## About this Summary

This is a high-level summary of the research and outreach effort. Detailed reports are available describing each component in more detail.

## Overview

Research and outreach included four distinct efforts: Community outreach, background research (Voice of the Customer research), qualitative research (QualBoards) with customers, and a scientific survey of customers.



## Community Outreach

SPU conducted outreach throughout the summer and fall of 2023 to gather customer feedback on essential services and identify key priorities in the community. This engagement effort centered and aimed to amplify the voices of historically underrepresented groups to ensure the SBP Update addresses the needs of the diverse communities SPU serves.

SPU - in partnership with the Department of Neighborhoods (DON) - worked with CLs, independent contractors with deep community connections, to implement an engagement strategy that was accessible and equitable.

This engagement model centered on co-designing engagement tools, like informational flyers and the community survey, with CLs to create materials that were accessible and easy to understand. With these materials, SPU attended 13 events across all City Council districts to distribute the survey and collect feedback. CLs played a crucial part in event engagement as they broke down language barriers and were friendly, familiar faces for community members.

Through this engagement, SPU collected 409 survey responses and reached over 1,155 customers.

## Voice of the Customer Research

The Voice of the Customer (VOC) research is a comprehensive review of 15 recent and relevant regional research studies commissioned by SPU and others to better understand residential and business customer experiences, opinions, and preferences as well as employee perspectives. Source material included Seattle and regional surveys, interviews, and focus groups. The VOC research analyzed the voluminous body of existing research to extract strategic information that would benefit the strategic

planning process. A priority was placed on understanding customer satisfaction and examining whether the utility's goals and values align with that of SPU customers.

The VOC presents findings from several key studies, offering an in-depth view of customer and community perceptions. By synthesizing these sources, the VOC research is crucial for guiding SPU's future strategies and operations.

### **Qualitative Research**

SPU partnered with Lund Faucett and Carter Research to facilitate QualBoards to gain deeper insights into customer perceptions and experiences regarding SPU services. This approach was chosen for its ability to engage diverse and often underrepresented audiences, offering a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding than traditional survey methods.

A QualBoard is an online bulletin board discussion group, akin to a focus group, where participants log in at their convenience over specified days to engage in moderated, interactive discussions. Research was conducted from February 28 to March 2, and engaged 30 participants.

Participants shared their experiences and opinions through written responses, providing authentic narratives and valuable insights. These findings are instrumental in shaping the SBP Update and enhancing our understanding of customer needs and priorities.

### **Customer Survey**

SPU also partnered with Lund Faucett and Carter Research to develop, implement, and analyze a comprehensive residential customer survey to better understand customer opinions regarding SPU knowledge, opinions, and preferences. The survey was fielded from November 13 to December 5, 2023, and garnered responses from 1,042 customers. The primary mode of data collection was an online survey (in English). Translated versions of the survey were provided in Chinese (traditional), Vietnamese, Spanish, Somali, Korean, Amharic, and Tagalog.

This survey, the first comprehensive residential customer analysis since 2017, establishes a new baseline of customer insights, enabling SPU to conduct regular research into the future to track and analyze customer trends over time. The survey design was informed by Qualboards, VOC research, and community outreach. Where appropriate, the survey methodology and instrument were aligned with Seattle City Light's 2023 customer survey to allow for comparative analysis.

## Key Themes and Findings

Component	Description	Key Themes/Findings
<b>Community Outreach</b>	Gathered public input and engaged historically underrepresented and often underserved populations on SPU’s 5 key questions (n =1,555)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The community expressed appreciation for high-visibility services like drinking water, but there is limited awareness of the full suite of services SPU provides.</li> <li>• There is confusion around the effectiveness of recycling programs and waste sorting.</li> <li>• Affordability is top of mind for customers.</li> <li>• Customers emphasized the importance of simplicity in communications or resources with the utility.</li> <li>• Some found difficulty reaching representatives for questions or general information about SPU, especially if the customer was not a native English speaker. Increased Spanish services were requested most.</li> <li>• The removal of litter, graffiti, needles, illegal dumping, and other hazards is a service not often attributed to SPU but is a top-of-mind concern for many community members.</li> </ul>
<b>Residential Customer Survey</b>	Fielded a broad-based online survey of SPU customers to inform the plan, ongoing service delivery and customer engagement (n=1,042)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There’s strong overall satisfaction with SPU’s services and low levels of dissatisfaction. Drinking water continues to be valued most highly and access to clean, safe drinking water is very important to a strong majority (88% say it’s ‘very important.)</li> <li>• Services provided by Seattle Clean City are top-of-mind and customers would like to see more done to address litter, garbage and dumping.</li> <li>• While SPU is viewed favorably and described as reliable, affordability is a strong concern and customers would like to see SPU do more to address costs and fees.</li> <li>• There are ample opportunities to improve SPU’s brand awareness—78% believe electricity is one of SPU’s services.</li> <li>• Opportunities also exist to improve customer awareness regarding SPU’s work to prepare for and mitigate climate change, protect health and the environment by moving dirty water out of homes and businesses, and ensure everyone has fair access to SPU services.</li> <li>• While awareness of financial assistance programs is high at 82%, renters are more challenging to reach and have lower levels of awareness around these programs.</li> </ul>
<b>QualBoards</b>	Qualitative research with SPU customers, with	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There’s overall satisfaction with SPU and strong confidence in the safety and reliability of Seattle drinking water.</li> </ul>

	<p>oversample of BIPOC, central/south Seattle and younger respondents (n=30)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Litter, dumping and uncontained garbage are a stronger concern.</li> <li>• There’s some confusion about the services SPU provides.</li> <li>• Overall impressions of SPU are mostly positive and SPU’s services are appreciated.</li> <li>• SPU’s persona is friendly, helpful, efficient and service-oriented.</li> <li>• Growth, environmental advances and water supply issues are seen as SPU’s biggest challenges.</li> <li>• While some participants were positive about SPU’s efforts around climate change, sustainability, and growth, many lacked awareness.</li> <li>• There’s an opportunity to improve awareness of financial assistance programs, community engagement opportunities, and conservation assistance.</li> <li>• The development of a strategic business plan is seen as important.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Voice of the Customer Research</b></p>	<p>Comprehensive review of research studies commissioned by SPU and others to better understand residential and business customer experiences, opinions, and preferences as well as employee perspectives</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High satisfaction with SPU services and desire for continued investment in services and infrastructure.</li> <li>• Visible SPU services like drinking water and recycling are well-regarded; however, Clean City services are less associated with SPU and there is notable dissatisfaction with the handling of city cleanliness issues.</li> <li>• Affordability of rates, rate predictability, cutting costs, and finding efficiencies are concerns.</li> <li>• Environmental leadership is a regional value and source of pride.</li> <li>• Positive perceptions of SPU’s approach to environmental stewardship exist, yet many lack awareness of SPU’s efforts around climate change and sustainability.</li> <li>• SPU employees feel valued and desire more opportunities for training and advancement. Cross-divisional communication remains an area for development.</li> <li>• Public preference is evident for public or community-owned utilities, with a strong belief in the importance ensuring access to healthy and affordable necessities.</li> <li>• Businesses appreciate opportunities to save money and desire streamlined customer service experiences.</li> </ul>

### Considerations and Opportunities

The insights gleaned from SBP research and outreach raise some issues for further consideration and potential opportunity areas that SPU will be working to address. Specifically:

1. How can we ensure that insights from outreach and research are shared effectively within the utility and used to inform service delivery and future outreach?

2. How can we close the feedback loop with the community, sharing the results of this and other research and outreach?
3. Are there opportunities SPU wants to pursue to receive more focused input?
4. Are there opportunities to coordinate research and outreach across SPU's lines of business to minimize fatigue/lack of participation and maximize organizational knowledge and continual improvement?

### **Additional Resources**

The following detailed research and outreach summaries are available:

- Voice of the Customer Research Report (February 2024)
- Qualitative Research Report (April 2023)
- Community Outreach Report (December 2023)
- Residential Customer Survey Report (February 2024)