



City of Seattle
Mayor Edward B. Murray

May 3, 2016

Honorable Bruce A. Harrell, President
President
Seattle City Council
City Hall, 2nd Floor

Dear Council President Harrell,

I am pleased to transmit two bills that will amend the Seattle Municipal Code to allow tenants of federally subsidized housing that include utility allowances (such as Seattle Housing Authority units) to enroll in the Utility Discount Program (“UDP”).

The UDP is one of the strongest low-income utility assistance programs in the country and a critical tool for keeping our city affordable for working families. Yet, as I learned shortly after my election, it remains underutilized.

In January of 2014, I announced an ambitious goal of doubling UDP enrollment (from 14,000 to 28,000 households) by the end of 2018. An interdepartmental team was formed to recommend ways to increase participation and improve the program. We began implementing the recommendations of that team in August of 2014, and we have made great progress.

With over 20,800 customers currently enrolled, we remain ahead of the pace needed to reach 28,000 enrollees by 2018. One of our key breakthroughs in growing enrollment was last year’s first-of-its-kind partnership with the Washington State Housing Finance Commission, which allowed the utilities to autoenroll over 5,000 low-income customers in the UDP.

However, we were unable to autoenroll customers in subsidized housing operated by the Seattle Housing Authority (“SHA”) or King County Housing Authority. The Seattle Municipal Code covering UDP for City Light expressly excludes tenants in such federally subsidized units.

The rationale for this long-standing exclusion appears to have been a concern that if the UDP was made available to such tenants, the housing authorities would benefit from the bill discount instead of low-income utility customers. Over the past few months, my staff has worked with SHA to review and clarify our understanding of SHA policies and address this concern. As a result of this work, we have determined that low-income housing authority tenants will in fact receive the full benefit of participation in the UDP, not the housing authority.

Given this better understanding – one which we are memorializing in a Memorandum of Agreement with SHA – it is now appropriate to allow SHA and King County Housing Authority tenants to enroll in the UDP.

Once this legislation is passed, our new partnership with SHA will allow us to autoenroll approximately 10,300 new UDP customers, beginning in August of this year. When this process completes, we will have exceeded my goal of 28,000 UDP households and done so more than two years ahead of schedule.

My goal was ambitious by design, intended to push ourselves to think creatively and embrace bold innovations. And I recognize that there was some initial hesitation about whether or not it was achievable. But, as our partnership on UDP has demonstrated, when we work together and think big, we can indeed achieve great things.

If you have any questions about this legislation or our new partnership with SHA, please contact Carlo Caldirola-Davis at 206-684-9281.

Sincerely,



Edward B. Murray
Mayor, City of Seattle