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Culture Change at the Waterworks.

By investing in customer service and innovation, D.C. Water has done far more than simply rebrand an essential public service.

Earlier this month, the District of Columbia Water and Sewer Authority issued a 100-year, \$350 million green bond to fund its Clean Rivers Project addressing overflows of sewage and stormwater into the region's waterways. The issuance leads the way as both the first municipal "century bond" and the first certified green bond in the United States. Innovative both in terms of finance and what it will do with the funds, the entity once known as D.C. WASA and rebranded as D.C. Water is demonstrating that it has changed much more than just its nickname.

D.C. Water has been on a steady path to greater professionalism and innovation for a decade. And across the board, from technology to finance to customer engagement, the utility reflects the organizational acumen and drive of its general manager, George Hawkins.

Named to the post in 2009 after serving as director of the district's Department of the Environment, Hawkins has worked to remake the water utility's public identity by strengthening its connections to the public. "The biggest single change we have made is the way that we interact with the people we serve," Hawkins says. "Customer interactions drive our model, and it is crucial that we continue to reconnect and improve customer service as we would with our latest technology."

For example, D.C. Water has pursued groundbreaking customer solutions to generate more precise meter readings and to save homeowners money. Its Automated Meter Infrastructure network uses both radio and cell technology to transmit water-consumption data, allowing customers to view their daily usage online. D.C. Water has taken this technology a step further with the development of a high-usage-alert system. Since its inception in 2006, the system has sent out more than 50,000 notices to customers warning them that their water usage had suddenly increased and urging them to look for a leak or other plumbing problem that might be responsible.

In addition to building strong relationships with customers, Hawkins sees engagement with the utility's employees as a crucial lever in producing a culture of innovation. "When I first get to an organization, I go on a listening tour and meet almost every employee. I hear from the people who work there, and their feedback informs my approach in implementing changes," says Hawkins, who on most workdays can be seen sporting the same unassuming white logoed uniform shirt worn by other D.C. Water employees. "Employees need to know that their time and effort matters."

Feedback from another quarter — experts and colleagues in the water industry — led D.C. Water to pursue its latest innovation: North America's first Cambi digester system. Named for the Norwegian company that developed it, the process reduces the time, cost and physical space associated with turning sewage biosolids into electricity by improving the efficiency of methane generation. When this \$460 million project begins operating in January 2015, it is expected to generate 13 megawatts of continuous clean, renewable power and cut the treatment plant's carbon footprint by one-third, saving D.C. Water millions of dollars annually.

The relationship between professionalism and innovation, as demonstrated by the Cambi project, is at the core of D.C. Water's work. These efforts include well-designed partnerships with private-sector engineering and construction firms, as well as a peer review process to find opportunities for improvement as measured against international best practices.

On his personal website, Hawkins acknowledges that the water industry is often stereotyped as being resistant to change. But "we have a responsibility to be vigilant about our level of productivity and financial efficiency," says Hawkins. "Like a private firm, we care about the market, our response times, and what our customers think."

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