

Staff Report

PROPOSED WATER PLANT STUDENT OPERATOR PROGRAM

January 28, 2014

Three years ago the Water Plant operations staff saw its first vacancy in nearly 12 years. As with many utilities, Ames is experiencing a wave of retirements among its employees. That opening began what is expected to be a 100% turnover in the Water Plant's operations staff in the next six years, simply due to retirements.

In preparation for this turnover, Water Plant staff has evaluated how to attract strong candidates for future full-time vacancies. One possibility that staff is very interested in is to implement a Student Operator Program, similar to those already implemented by the Iowa City Water Plant; the University of Iowa Water Plant; the Moorhead, Minnesota Water Plant; and the Brookings, South Dakota Wastewater Plant. In each case, the student operator positions are comprised primarily of engineering students who work mostly on weekends.

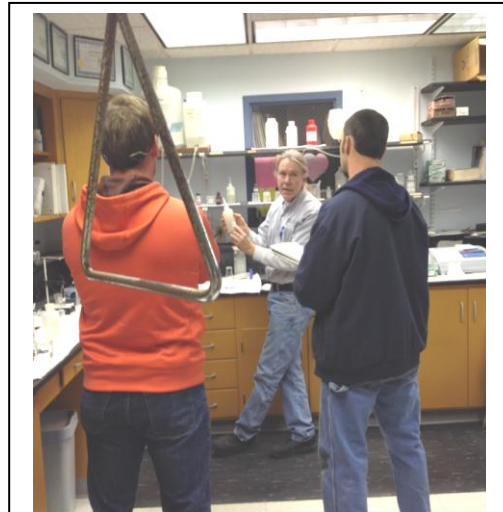
The Ames Water Plant is proposing to start a similar program. Under the proposed plan, four students will be hired to start work right after the end of the spring 2014 semester. These students will train over the summer months, and will be ready to operate the plant by the start of the fall 2014 semester, covering the weekend evening and weekend overnight shifts.

There is a need for a modest increase (\$8,306) in the current year's operating budget to allow the students to begin in May 2014. Through attrition, the number of permanent full-time operators will be reduced from six to five in 2014/15, with the vacancy resulting from an expected retirement late in calendar 2014 not being filled. Though the reason for this proposal was not specifically to save money, there would be a modest savings in FY 14/15 of approximately \$19,500. **These budget adjustments have been included in the FY 13/14 amended and FY 14/15 requested budgets that will be presented to Council next week.**

Advantages of the proposed student operator program include the following:

- It will provide an opportunity to expose college students to the drinking water profession. Like many professions, the drinking water industry is facing a wave of retirements, and a program like this that exposes students to the opportunities and rewards of the field is extremely important. It is even possible that some may become future City of Ames employees, either as an operator or as a staff engineer.

- It will provide a more attractive shift schedule for our permanent full-time operators. The quickly rotating schedule will be slowed down, and operators will work fewer weekend shifts.
- The program is modeled after the Ames Water Plant's very successful "Assistant Operator" classification. This has been in place for approximately three years with no change in the performance of the treatment plant or quality of water provided to our community. This classification was also created to try to expand the pool of qualified potential employees.
- During the transition from the existing Water Plant to the new Water Plant, it would be beneficial to have additional temporary staff to help operate both plants during the switchover. The student operators would also provide more flexibility for covering long vacations or extended absences for the full-time operators.
- Student employees bring a dynamic level of energy and enthusiasm to the workplace, which helps to further the City's goal of providing "an enjoyable and stimulating work place."
- As with other student operator programs, Ames would primarily use engineering students. It has been our experience that these students pick up the concepts of plant operations very quickly, because they have already had classes on the science and practices of water treatment. Two of the City's engineering interns have already spent time job shadowing plant operators. The operators observed that the students grasped these duties very quickly.
- It would keep current operators up to speed on their job. There is no better way to make sure people understand the principles and science behind what they do than to need to explain it to others.
- It would keep the employee training plan up-to-date.
- The Iowa Department of Natural Resources is supportive of this proposed program, and has no concerns about the ability of students to handle the tasks and responsibilities of operating a large water treatment facility.
- Iowa State University has a wealth of engineering students who may be interested in these positions. Staff has already reached out, and those efforts have been well-received by both professors and students.



Water Plant Operator Mike Buns explains the treatment process to DMACC students.

- After the first year, there will be a slight cost savings in the operating budget, which helps to further the City's goal of "providing exceptional service at the best price."

Additionally, this position will be opened up to students in the new DMACC Water and Wastewater Technology Programs. These students are enrolled to begin a career in water plant operations. Therefore, if a student from that program is selected to work as a student operator, that student could possibly become employed as a future, full-time operator.

One aspect that differentiates this from other Student Operator Programs staff has investigated is that there will be a full-time operator on duty during the day shift each Saturday and Sunday. In the other utilities using this program, each weekend is staffed exclusively with students. Ames Water Plant leadership sees a lot of benefit to having one full-time operator working each weekend day to ensure things are running smoothly. Any day-to-day questions the students have can thus be answered at both ends of their shifts. In addition, any time a student has questions or concerns, full-time staff will be available to answer.

Staff wants to convey very clearly our belief that this change in the way the Water Plant is staffed will continue the long tradition of outstanding performance by the facility and its operators. The minimum qualifications for these student operators will be no different than what is already required for an Assistant Operator, and the training provided to the students will be just as comprehensive as for any other new addition to the operating team. The only difference is that the students will be part-time, temporary employees. It is also worth noting that the current full-time operators have been involved extensively in the consideration of this student operator program, and there is considerable support for it from them.

There is no action being requested of the City Council at this time. This concept will be incorporated into the Water utility's operating budget request. Staff wanted to inform the Council of this innovative concept that we hope to initiate in the near future.