

Portland computer system gives some city workers fits

By Janie Har, The Oregonian

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Inscrutable paychecks. Missing vacation time. Botched child support.

Talk to public employees in Portland and some liken the city's new payroll system to a computer flasco worse than the great water billing mishap of 2002.

"I've got 922 members. On average, half of those members spend two hours every single paycheck just trying to decipher what was and was not paid," said Scott Westerman, president of the Portland police union.

Employee grumbling, especially among police and fire workers, is the latest wrinkle for a computer system that was \$19 million over budget and at least 10 months behind schedule. The new \$48 million SAP system, which includes payroll and other internal business operations, was designed to streamline purchasing, update numbers in real time and cut down on paperwork.

In short, it was supposed to save taxpayers money in the long run.

It's uncertain whether employees are getting less pay than they've earned or more overall, but the Sturm und Drang means they're spending public time hashing out personal pay. And it's eroded confidence in something most of us take for granted: that we're paid what we're owed.

"I make a good living and I work hard, and my paycheck is something I've never really thought of in the past," said Mike Stradley, a Portland police officer.

"Now with so many mistakes, I've had to make that a major focus. I don't ever trust I'm being paid properly."

City officials have downplayed problems with SAP since the payroll portion went live last June. They say there are hiccups with any new technology, that they're resolving issues as they arise, and that much of this has to do with human training, not computers.

Still, they concede they can do a better job reaching out to workers during what they call a "stabilization" period.

"There is a learning curve and anyone who has implemented a system this big knows it takes 18 months to stabilize, and we're only at six," said Laurel Butman, spokeswoman for the Office of Management and Finance.

Jennifer Sims, chief financial officer for the city, objected to comparisons with the Water Bureau, which lost between \$20 million to \$30 million on an untested billing system.

"We are not getting a deluge of people being paid incorrectly," she said.

The Portland City Council honored Chief Administrative Officer Ken Rust and the SAP system last summer, even as members acknowledged the problems that have plagued it. City Auditor LaVonne Griffin-Valade has assigned a review of the system.

Commissioner Dan Saltzman, who oversees police, chalked up the complaints to usual growing pains.

The city doesn't track all SAP-related complaints specific to payroll, Butman said. But she said the city has issued only 534 new checks since June because of SAP-related errors. That's out of more than 119,000 checks issued.

However, that doesn't include 1,600 paychecks the city flubbed Dec. 31 because workers hadn't programmed

SAP correctly. Most employees were underpaid, anywhere from 44 cents to \$3,400.

"It exacerbated the lack of confidence in our system," said Jim Forquer, president of the Portland Firefighters Association. "It threw our folks into a little bit of a tailspin."

Portland police criminalist Joel Mann gets paid about \$2,300 every two weeks. On the last day of last year, his check was \$9,063.94 -- including a \$6,108.10 overpayment.

"I said, 'What's this? And what do I need to do?'" he said. "They still haven't told me what to do."

Mann wants to write the city a check for the amount overpaid, but he has been told no. On his most recent paycheck, he said, the city hadn't deducted any taxes.

There have always been payroll questions, especially in a city with labor agreements as complicated as Portland's. Police receive money for special equipment, and tree trimmers get more wages based on how high the tree.

But the new paychecks, unlike the old pay stubs, don't spell out as clearly what the employee is getting for what.

The police union has filed several labor grievances, including one last month on behalf of Lonn Sweeney, a Portland canine handler, and others in his position.

Sweeney has questioned why he lost sick time in a week when he wasn't sick. And he said has yet to convince payroll that he didn't work overtime on Thanksgiving. He did convince payroll that he wasn't owed \$600 the city inadvertently gave him in one recent paycheck.

"I know at some point they might figure it out. They still don't believe me I didn't work overtime on Thanksgiving," Sweeney said.

Butman said the city has corrected vacation accruals for firefighters, and has agreed not to take out money unilaterally from people's pay.

And in one instance, the system worked in favor of taxpayers.

When Assistant Police Chief Bret Smith retired this month, he had to pay back about \$10,000. SAP identified that he had been overpaid for some time.

"While I'm not excited about paying it back, I think that from an accountability perspective ... this has been something good for the citizens of Portland," Smith said.

-- Janie Har

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