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Taxpayer Group Shines Light on Power Co. Finances

Group's scrutiny of Heber Light & Power continues after arrests, rate-hike requests

By Colby Frazier @colbyfrazierlp



• **Members of Wasatch Taxpayers Association, left to right: Merry Duggin, Dennis Jensen, Chuck Zuercher and Tracy Taylor**

Political agitation and upheaval aren't widely associated with the Heber Valley, a picturesque and mountainous small town synonymous with cowboys, ranching and the state's last historic railroad.

But the Wasatch Taxpayers Association website suggests otherwise. The group has in its cross hairs the local school district, a public utility, special-service districts and all of the area's municipalities.

While a key focus of taxpayers associations across the country is to oppose new taxes, the effort in Wasatch County has sought to shed light on the gears of government that have grown accustomed to working in the shade. The focal point of these energies is the opaque dealings of the Heber Light & Power Company, which galvanized the formation of the taxpayer association and remains under fire by critics for its lack of transparency.

Its board of directors received a rebuke from the Utah Attorney General's Office after voting in late 2011 to pay its members cash in lieu of health benefits they didn't want or need.

Owned and operated by the communities of Heber, Charleston and Midway, the power company's problems were a keystone issue in the 2013 election campaign of Heber Mayor Alan McDonald, who pledged to make "significant changes to the company and bring it back to sound and transparent government."

But despite this increased scrutiny, or perhaps because of it, in June, the utility's chief financial officer, Anthony Furness, was arrested and charged with a second-degree felony for billing \$50,000 in personal

expenses to his employer. During the investigation into Furness, investigators discovered he was wanted in Canada on charges that he'd defrauded a power company there of \$5,000.

Tracy Taylor, chair of the taxpayer association's board, says she and her colleagues have their eye on the money trail. "And when you just keep track of the money the transparency and accountability and openness really hasn't been there in Wasatch County," she says.

Recently, calls for more transparency came from the utility's own board. Upon their appointment to the board in February 2014, Heber City Council members Heidi Franco and Kelleen Potter, faced with considering a proposed utility rate hike, began questioning what the company was doing with its revenues.

Initially, they sought salary disclosures from the utility's top executive, asking to see how much money the general manager and general counsel were making before considering the rate increase. For months, their requests went unanswered. Eventually, though, the employee salaries—six of which are more than \$100,000—were posted on the utility's website. Then, Potter says, she began asking questions about other expenses, like the nearly \$800 that expense reports show the company spent on hot chocolate and coffee in a single month.

"They were just spending money that didn't seem appropriate or fair to the rate payers," Potter says.

Because of these expenses, and some salaries that Potter says she finds excessive, she and Franco were able to defeat the rate increase. And a resolution sponsored by Potter and Franco that urged the city's manager to review the utility's expenditures and make recommendations on how it could be run more efficiently, was approved by the Heber City Council.

The culmination of these acts, Potter speculates, led to the removal in July of herself and Franco from the utility's board. Phone messages and emails seeking comment from McDonald, who tossed the council members from the board, were not immediately returned to *City Weekly*.

Joseph Dunbeck, general counsel at Heber Light & Power, declined to comment on the removal of Potter and Franco.

Taylor says McDonald removed the two women because they were demanding financial transparency.

"If they're just asking for financial disclosures and that's threatening the company, we've got a bigger problem here," she says.