

# Seattle Steam turns it on when cold snaps at city

By Larry Lange  
P-I Reporter

While some Seattleites shivered, a steam heat plant on their city's waterfront kept downtown offices, apartments and hotels warm yesterday.

And while many city residents could expect higher-than-ever electricity bills during the cold spell, the plant's operators hope to cash in on the rising costs of electricity.

The two boiler plants where Seattle Steam Corp. produces steam heat for its 400 customers have been downtown landmarks for decades. Their smokestacks loom above the Alaskan Way viaduct and are visible to passing motorists, but the company inside, is a mystery to many Seattleites.

It grew out of two firms formed in the 1890s to provide steam heat and power to a growing pioneer city. In 1912 the predecessor of the current Puget Sound Power & Light Co. acquired the company's steam plants, located at 633 Post Ave. and 1319 Western Ave., but later sold them to some downtown building owners who formed their own heating utility when Puget Power dropped Seattle service in 1951.

The building owners sold out in 1972 to the KPK Corp., which still runs Seattle Steam as a subsidiary.

## Miles of pipelines

The company's two plants have six boilers, including five that can be fired either by natural gas or bunker-C fuel oil; four of those are at the Western Avenue plant, the other at Post Alley. One electric unit at the

Western Avenue site is used in summer when electricity is cheapest.

Steam moves out of the plants to customers through 18 miles of underground pipelines reaching customers in a service area reaching from Blanchard to King Streets and from the waterfront to 14th Avenue.

Two of the company's 13 boiler operators were on duty at 4 a.m. Monday when this week's freezing weather began arriving. There were two boilers running then; the operators checked forecasts and temperatures and fired up two more. By the end of the day they had cranked out seven million pounds of steam, compared to six million pounds on Friday, the last previous business day. Tuesday the plant turned out 8 million pounds of steam.

## Competition heats up

At the peak of production this week, the company's day shift engineer, Arnold Willey, said the boilers were cranking out 464,000 pounds an hour — the equivalent of enough electrical energy to serve more than 75 average electrically heated homes for a month.

Over the years, Seattle Steam has felt a sting from competing electrical utilities. Hydroelectric power plants were built, and the "all-electric" building push of the 1950s and 1960s took the oomph out of the steam business.

By the 1970s new buildings used electric heat instead of the steam from the company's two plants. The company held its old customers,

including downtown hotels, three federal government buildings, Swedish Hospital, Seattle University and Seattle Community College. But after energy conservation took hold, "business leveled off," said Jim Young, the company's new manager for marketing and business development. "We weren't getting any new additions."

## A mix of power sources

After two Washington Public Power Supply System nuclear plants were terminated in 1982, conditions began to change. Developers began looking for alternate ways to heat buildings. Hoping to get out of its doldrums, Seattle Steam last summer hired Young away from the Weyerhaeuser Co. to beat the bricks and try to reignite Seattle's old interest in steam as downtown development picks up.

Young says he's getting a lot of interest from developers who want a mix of energy sources for their buildings — electricity for heat pumps and lights, perhaps, but maybe steam service for water heating and backup for heating and ventilation systems. He says steam costs no more than electricity does now and that steam will become a better bargain as electrical rates rise.

He can't point to any new customers he has signed up, however, and admits he has a selling job ahead. "I'm not sure it's a comeback, it's more going ahead from where we are," he said of his company's effort. His pitch in selling steam: "It's old, but not old-fashioned."