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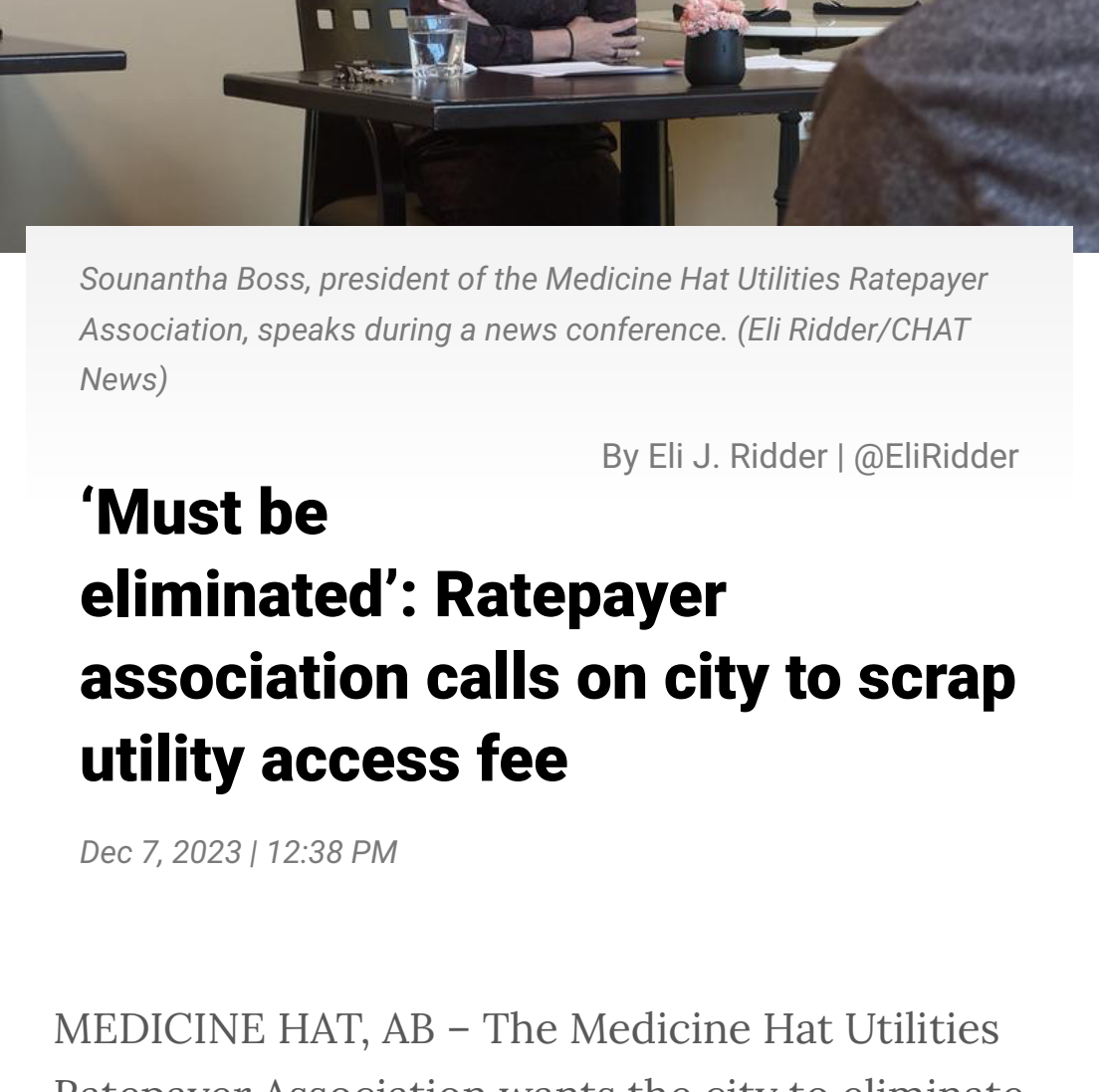
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Sounantha Boss, president of the Medicine Hat Utilities Ratepayer Association, speaks during a news conference. (Eli Ridder/CHAT News)

By Eli J. Ridder | @EliRidder

‘Must be eliminated’: Ratepayer association calls on city to scrap utility access fee

Dec 7, 2023 | 12:38 PM

MEDICINE HAT, AB – The Medicine Hat Utilities Ratepayer Association wants the city to eliminate a utility fee that was put in place four years ago and held a news conference Thursday to emphasize its request.

The association, in a letter sent to council and written by president Sounantha Boss earlier this week, criticized the municipal consent access fee on the city-owned utility company that is paid for by taxing residents.

“This fee, introduced in 2019 from the previous council, was only meant to be a temporary fee to address the large deficit at the time,” Boss told reporters from inside her restaurant Thai Orchid Room.

“As of this moment, this fee has served its purpose and must be eliminated. The fee is now a burden on hard working Medicine Hat families and businesses.”

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The access fee, known as the MCAF, is commonly used by municipalities for third-party utility companies setting up shop on city-owned property.

The utility then downloads the cost to customers to make up the money.

Despite having a publicly-owned utility company, Medicine Hat council in 2018 added the MCAF to fill a \$16 million deficit in its budget.

The ratepayer association in its letter asked the mayor and councillors why the fee still stands despite the previous council’s initial plans to have it phased out by 2023.

The association, known as MHURA, why the fee is rising while the utility made \$100 million in profits from the last two years.

The MCAF is currently set at 15.25 per cent but is scheduled to increase to 18 per cent in 2024, according to MHURA.

Gord Cowan, one of four newly-minted executives, said the city needs to make it clear why the fee exists if they plan to continue with it.

“If there is a specific budget deficit that this fee has to look after, then the city has to let us know that; it has to be transparent,” Cowen told CHAT News.

“The fact...the fee was quietly moved through and increased is a concern to us and we just want to see the reasoning behind it.”

Cowen said MHURA plans to look into every fee charged to Hatters.

“We will be looking at all fees that Medicine Hat residents are charged on their bills,” he said.

‘NO WAY, SHAPE OR FORM ADVERSARIAL’

MHURA’s letter was sent soon after a separate letter was sent asking Alberta government officials for an inspection of the city and its utility company and amid an effort to recall the mayor.

While Cowan denied MHURA’s activity was related to the other letter or the recall petition, he acknowledged it could be a sign of mistrust in city hall.

“Is that a sign that people are starting to question what’s going on? Yes, it probably is and well should be,” Cowan said.

“It’s important that the people understand why they’re being charged and what they’re being charged.”


Members of MHURA maintained the letter sent to the city was not combative.

“The letter was in no way, shape or form adversarial,” Cowen said.

The city has not replied to MHURA’s letter at this time, according to Cowen.


CHAT News has requested comment from council and a status update on the fee. The city is expected to issue a statement in response to the letter Thursday afternoon.

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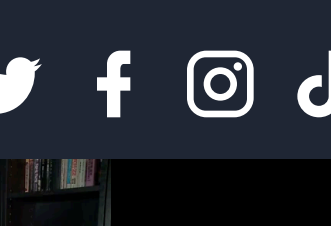


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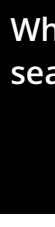
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