

Public Works Committee Report
RE: Water Meter Project Update

Date: September 21, 2022

Chair: Alderman Chris Etti

Other committee members present: Aldermen Barbagallo, Gillam, Whitcomb

Other Aldermen present: Doenges, Talbott

Others present:

Jim Rotundo, Commissioner of Public Works

Mary Markowski, Treasurer

Gail Gorruso, DPW Business Manager

The meeting convened at 5:31 pm to get an update on the water meter installation project that began in 2018. The beginning of the project to install a fully automated meter reading system throughout the service area saw a number of challenges, most specifically the dissolution of Fathom and the need to replace them with multiple vendors. DPW sees the current billing system as reliable and stable, and about 50 % of customers are enrolled with WaterSmart as their account portal where they can get real time data from their meters. Customer service is also all in-house now. Most of the meters are able to be read in minutes but about 365 accounts require the meter readers to drive by the accounts. This is due to some hardware and software issues and the DPW team is working with the vendors to remedy the issues before signing off on future payments.

There are 44 active accounts that still do not have the new meters installed. Five of these are commercial accounts and the others are residential. The 39 residential accounts are being charged a scheduled rate, which bases the charges on the number of bedrooms in the unit. Interestingly, about half of these residential accounts are being charged based on the number of people living in the unit, self-identified by the account holder. This rate is not in any documentation and will be phased out.

DPW staff also discussed another issue that has arisen - the rising number of delinquencies. Treasurer Markowski noted that the state's program to help residents pay delinquent utility bills was used widely to help keep people current but others have not or were not eligible. One important contributor to the rising delinquencies is the accounts on the scheduled rate.

Because of this, DPW worked through the city attorney and a third-party attorney to create a new water shut off policy so that they could shut off the water supply to a property with a delinquent account. The policy was developed in accordance with Public Service Board regulations. It is thought that this will be a helpful tool to use in collections before balances are allowed to get too high. Currently the only mechanism to collect is to tax sale the property.

Members present voiced concern for those who are unable to pay, and particularly for those who may need the water supply for heat in the winter. Because DPW considers this an internal administrative policy, the Board's input is advisory, but DPW staff agreed to hold off any shutoffs during the winter months and to use the policy judiciously.

The treasurer noted her office's role in collections and the importance of the two offices working together.

The meeting adjourned at 6:30 pm. This report was for information only.

Respectfully submitted,

Chris Etti, Chair