



Public Facilities Committee Report

City of Newton In City Council

Wednesday, February 7, 2024

Present: Councilors Albright (Chair), Getz, Laredo, Kelley, Leary and Kalis

Absent: Councilors Danberg and Gentile

Also Present: Councilors Malakie, Farrell and Wright

City Staff: Commissioner of Public Works James McGonagle, Deputy Commissioner of Public Works Shawna Sullivan, Director of Public Utilities Tom Fitzgerald and Finance Director for Public Works Coleman Flaherty

For more information regarding this meeting, a video recording can be found at the following link: [Public Facilities Committee - February 7, 2024 - YouTube](#)

#65-24 **Discussion with Public Works about Residential Water Bills**
COUNCILORS KRINTZMAN, ALBRIGHT AND GROSSMAN requesting a discussion with Public Works about what the department has done to prepare residents for unanticipated water bills. The discussion should include actions the city has taken to prepared residents who may receive unusually high bills, actions the city is taking on behalf of residents who receive unanticipated bills, and options that residents have who receive unusually high bills. The discussion may also lead to recommendations of additional actions that the city may take.

Action: **Public Facilities Held 6-0**

#66-24 **Discussion on non-working water meter transponders and billing issues**
COUNCILORS MALAKIE, KELLEY, WRIGHT, BIXBY, HUMPHREY, LAREDO, OLIVER, FARRELL and LUCAS requesting discussion with Utilities Division on issues related to non-working water meter transponders including past and current billing procedures, and potential improvements for remainder of new meter installation period.

Action: **Public Facilities Held 6-0**

Notes: These items were discussed concurrently.

Notes: Commissioner of Public Works James McGonagle presented items #65-24 and #66-24 to the Committee. He began by giving a brief overview of the water meter transponder and billing issues, reminding that in Spring of 2022, Public Works came to the council requesting funding to replace the city's water meters which were prematurely failing, specifically the transponders (MTUS) were failing to send meter readings. Commissioner McGonagle continued that the water meter company was an overseas manufacturer, which eventually went bankrupt. Mr. McGonagle explained that prior to the pandemic, the city started seeing the failures and realized that Public Works was not going to be able to procure the new MTU units, so Public Works moved forward with replacement of the entire water meter system.

Commissioner McGonagle explained there are 29,518 water meters citywide. The city is seeing out of those 29,518 meters, 14,103 are receiving estimated reads. Currently the vendor is installing about 500 meters a week. As of January 31st, the city has replaced about 8,500 meters, which is about 30% of the needed replacements.

Commissioner McGonagle explained that the city has been proactively working to replace meters. When a citizen sends in a reading greater than 50 HCFS, the city has attempts to replace them quickly.

Commissioner McGonagle added that Public Works has worked with Munis to develop an Interim billing system, which the city previously did not have the capability to do before. He added that Public Works has tested this system, and it is working well. Commissioner McGonagle added that the city has implemented a 12-month interest free payment plan to pay catch-up bills. Commissioner McGonagle added that the new system will allow residents to sign up online which will allow them to set alerts for any issues looking forward, and also allows residents to view their water consumption.

Commissioner McGonagle explained that the city has procured the meters from Neptune a company which has been in business for 50 years, and manufactures all their products in the United States. He noted that the company assures that new equipment is backwards compatible, meaning that any of their new technologies work with their old meters.

Deputy Commissioner of Public Works Shawna Sullivan explained to the Committee that Public Works will be working backwards with residents to give them a daily average of their readings to make it equitable. She explained that if someone has an underestimate, the daily average will allow the city to spread the bill over the right water usage tiers.

Commissioner McGonagle ended by explaining that going forward, the city is looking to potentially charge citizens by the gallon, which would get much closer to true reads.

Councilor asked the following questions:

Q – Will you be replacing both the meters and transponders?

A – Yes, this will be an entirely new system.

Q – Are there any other things that the city can do to speed this process up, because of the impact this is having on Newton residents?

A – Right now the contractor has 15 technicians across the city. The problem is that the city must shut the water off at every property to replace the meters and doesn't have enough staff to do this more quickly.

Q – What is the target date to have all the meters replaced?

A – The city's projected date is September of 2025.

Q – Does the city have citizens who have overpaid into this system that are owed money?

A – Yes there are. Those people who overpaid were able to get an instant credit, or have the option to request a check from the treasury department.

Q – Why is this projected to get done in September of 2025 if the city is installing 500 new meters a week?

A – It took Public Works and the contractors some time to ramp up to be able to replace 500 meters a week. It is going to be harder to maintain the 500 meters a week with resident cooperation.

Q – How much is this whole replacement project costing the city?

A – It will cost \$16 million, from the city's water-sewer budget.

Q – Can the city change the language in the water bills to explain whether this is an estimated bill or a new meter bill?

A – Yes, with the new technology, we will be able to create an interim bill on the spot, and the department is going to start to push this information out to residents. Public Works has also hired some temporary help, with the hope that residents will begin to contact the city more frequently so those changes can be made immediately.

Q – Will the letters you plan to send go out to everyone who's getting an estimated bill? Or just to people who send their meter readings?

A – It will go to anyone whose bill is estimated by Public Works. They will receive their bill as well as a letter.

Q – If a house has been receiving an estimated bill for some time, and the house sells... what happens?

A – The account will be settled before closing. The fees are appropriately attributed to the previous owner, and the new reads will start with a new owner of a property. Note: if the seller fails to ask to settle the bill the new owner may be charged old bills.

Q – If residents have not gotten their meters replaced yet, can they access the new portal?

A – No, the portal will only be available to those who have gotten their meters replaced.

Q – Since the city has had this issue over the last 5 years, has the city had any shortfalls for being able to pay the MWRA bill?

A – The city has not had any shortfalls paying the MWRA bill.

Councilors made the following comments:

Councilors shared the opinion that the city should not be so optimistic that this manufacturer won't give the city similar issues when it comes to the warrantee of these new meters, and that there should be consideration with the law department as to what extra protection can be provided for these new devices so the city doesn't run into a similar problem in the future with a potential bankruptcy.

Some Councilors expressed appreciation that the city will be hiring part time workers to assist with the "smoothing" analysis for previous incorrect readings.

Chair Albright opened the floor for public comment.

Marc Heimlich of 96 Hawthorne Avenue. Mr. Heimlich explained that he had received a \$15,000 bill. He was disappointed with the lack of communication as to how this number was derived. He joined tonight's recognizing that the problems have existed since 2019 and he felt the reconciliation efforts have been mismanaged. He would have made efforts to change his family's water usage during that period if he had seen the large bill. He also expressed concern there has been mismanagement to reconcile the issues with the manufacturer. After a meeting with the mayor several concessions were put in place including "smoothing" every bill rather than just residents who complain.

Marilyn Crone of 72 Fuller Street. Ms. Crone explained that when she received the letter saying the city would be changing its meters, she immediately set up an appointment. She lives in a condominium and received a \$8,000 bill. She felt the lack of communication from the billing department was concerning. She mentioned that she had connected with the Director of Public Utilities and was offered smoothing towards the amount.

Eddy Sternberg of 90 Meadowbrook Rd. said that it is worrisome that it has taken the amount of time it did for the water meter issue to be resolved. Mr. Sternberg thinks he has been overcharged for his meter readings since 2021 and did not send any of his bills to the city until this year. He expressed concerns with how the city plans to refund the money to those who had improper readings.

David Helfman of 22 Grayson Lane. Mr. Helfman explained that like many others, when he got his meter replaced and received his first bill, it was larger than the average bill. Mr. Helfman explained to the committee that over the last couple of years he had taken pictures of his water meter readings, and sent them to City Hall, and was surprised to find that his bills were underestimated. Mr. Helfman expressed that he felt like the city handled the smoothing process in an appropriate manner.

Deborah Crossley of 26 Circuit Avenue. Ms. Crossley said that she is pleased with how professionally and diligently the Department of Public Works has responded and appreciates how they are working towards a solution that makes sense for everyone.

The committee adjourned at 8:40 PM.

Respectfully Submitted,

Susan Albright, Chair

No More Water Bill Surprises!

Sign-Up For the City of Newton Neptune 360 Consumer Water Portal and Take Control of Your Water Usage

Learn more about your water habits and conserve water with the City of Newton Neptune 360 Consumer Water Portal. With your water consumption data at your fingertips, you can find answers to questions about your account without having to call or visit the utility. In addition, the City of Newton Neptune 360 Consumer Water Portal offers the following benefits.

- View and manage your water usage 24/7 with an intuitive dashboard featuring charts and graphs
- Monitor multiple properties from one account
- Set out-of-town alerts to monitor consumption and detect potential leaks
- Manage multiple meters to get a better understanding of your water usage
- Access easily from any desktop, laptop, tablet, or mobile device
- Create water threshold alerts to set a water budget, help save water, and eliminate bill surprises

Activate your City of Newton Neptune 360 portal account today, by going to <https://newtonma.my360-app.com/>

Have your water bill handy. You will need your account number, and either your full name or street address.

- Click create account on the first screen.
- Accept the website terms and conditions
- Enter the bill number without dashes
- Enter the account holder's full name(as it appears on the bill)
- Street address
- Three security questions with answers
- email address
- A link will be sent to the email for account activation (Check your spam folder as the email may be flagged as spam)
- Create a password
- Done



WATER/SEWER BILL

VISIT OUR WEBSITE AT <http://WWW.NEWTONMA.GOV>

FOR BILLING INQUIRIES, ADDRESS CHANGES AND SALE OF PROPERTY CALL (617) 796-1040

FOR METER REPAIRS CALL (617) 796-1640

FOR PAYMENT QUESTIONS CALL (617) 796-1330

FOR STORMWATER QUESTIONS CALL (617) 796-1038

TERMS: BILLS DUE 30 DAYS FROM BILL DATE.

Past due balances may be subject to interest charges at 6% per annum.

MAILING ADDRESS	ACCOUNT NUMBER	BILLING DATE
[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	11/24/2023
	METER NUMBER	DUE DATE
	[REDACTED]	12/26/2023

BILLING ACTIVITY FOR	[REDACTED]
PRIOR BALANCE	\$0.01
INTEREST CHARGES	\$0.00

IMPERVIOUS AREA SQ FOOTAGE

*For Non-Residential Property where Storm Water Impervious Surface Area Rates apply, Please visit www.newtonma.gov for details.

CURRENT CHARGES FOR BILL DATE	11/24/2023
WATER	\$38.10
SEWER	\$59.20
STORMWATER	\$28.50
LESS ELDERLY O DISCOUNT	\$0.00
LESS ELDERLY W DISCOUNT	\$0.00
TOTAL CURRENT CHARGES	\$125.80
PLEASE PAY TOTAL AMOUNT DUE	\$125.81

CONSUMPTION	WATER	SEWER	COMBINED
1 to 10 HCF	\$7.62	\$11.84	\$19.46
11 to 25 HCF	\$8.81	\$13.85	\$22.66
26 to 60 HCF	\$10.13	\$14.88	\$25.01
> 60 HCF	\$12.63	\$17.11	\$29.74

Outdoor Meter Rates \$13.92 per HCF

If you have received an ESTIMATED bill, please take a picture of the meter number and meter read and email it to waterbilling@newtonma.gov. If the read is higher, we advise to pay the bill as it stands. If the read is lower you will receive an abatement letter in 5-7 days explaining the amount to take off your bill. You WILL NOT receive a revised bill.

CURRENT CONSUMPTION		CONSUMPTION HISTORY		USAGE ON METER	
READING DATE	READING	READ TYPE	CONSUMPTION	REMOVED	
11/21/2023	19	E	5	0	A-Automatic Reading Transmitted to City Hall
08/24/2023	14				C-Customer Read
USAGE					V-Visual Read By City Technician
Hundred Cubic Feet: 5					E-Estimate
1 HCF (Hundred Cubic Feet) = 750 Gallons					M-Manual Adjusted Read

ESTIMATED READ

BILLING DATE	ACCT #
11/24/2023	[REDACTED]



CITY OF NEWTON
P.O. BOX 9137
NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02460-9137

ESTIMATED READ

DUE DATE	12/26/2023
BILL #	76048067
TOTAL DUE	\$125.81
AMOUNT PAID	\$

In order to insure that your account is credited properly: Please return the bottom portion of this statement, include the BILL NUMBER on your check, and make it payable to: City of Newton.

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CITY OF NEWTON
PO BOX 9137
NEWTON MA 02460-9137

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WATER/SEWER BILL

VISIT OUR WEBSITE AT <http://WWW.NEWTONMA.GOV>

FOR BILLING INQUIRIES, ADDRESS CHANGES AND SALE OF PROPERTY CALL (617) 796-1040

FOR METER REPAIRS CALL (617) 796-1640

FOR PAYMENT QUESTIONS CALL (617) 796-1330

FOR STORMWATER QUESTIONS CALL (617) 796-1038

TERMS: BILLS DUE 30 DAYS FROM BILL DATE.

Past due balances may be subject to interest charges at 6% per annum.

MAILING ADDRESS	ACCOUNT NUMBER	BILLING DATE
[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	11/24/2023
	METER NUMBER	DUE DATE
	[REDACTED]	12/26/2023

BILLING ACTIVITY FOR	[REDACTED]
PRIOR BALANCE	\$80.50
INTEREST CHARGES	\$2.35

CURRENT CHARGES FOR BILL DATE	11/24/2023
WATER	\$0.00
SEWER	\$0.00
STORMWATER	\$28.50
LESS ELDERLY O DISCOUNT	\$0.00
LESS ELDERLY W DISCOUNT	\$0.00
TOTAL CURRENT CHARGES	\$28.50
PLEASE PAY TOTAL AMOUNT DUE	\$111.35

IMPERVIOUS AREA SQ FOOTAGE

*For Non-Residential Property where Storm Water Impervious Surface Area Rates apply, Please visit www.newtonma.gov for details.

CONSUMPTION	WATER	SEWER	COMBINED
1 to 10 HCF	\$7.62	\$11.84	\$19.46
11 to 25 HCF	\$8.81	\$13.85	\$22.66
26 to 60 HCF	\$10.13	\$14.88	\$25.01
> 60 HCF	\$12.63	\$17.11	\$29.74

Outdoor Meter Rates \$13.92 per HCF

RIGHT TO DISPUTE YOUR WATER/SEWER BILL: Please go to www.newtonma.gov for the Application for Water Leak Abatement. While in dispute, owner is still responsible for FULL PAYMENT OF THE BILL by due date to avoid interest charges.

CURRENT CONSUMPTION		CONSUMPTION HISTORY		USAGE ON METER
READING DATE	READING	READ TYPE	CONSUMPTION	REMOVED
11/21/2023				0
				A-Automatic Reading Transmitted to City Hall
				C-Customer Read
				V-Visual Read By City Technician
				E-Estimate
				M-Manual Adjusted Read
USAGE				
Hundred Cubic Feet:				
1 HCF (Hundred Cubic Feet) = 750 Gallons				

PAY THIS BILL ONLINE @ WWW.NEWTONMA.GOV INSTEAD OF your personal online bank. It's safe, easy, and secure.

BILLING DATE	ACCT #
11/24/2023	[REDACTED]



CITY OF NEWTON
P.O. BOX 9137
NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02460-9137

DUE DATE	12/26/2023
BILL #	76049736
TOTAL DUE	\$111.35
AMOUNT PAID	\$

In order to insure that your account is credited properly: Please return the bottom portion of this statement, include the BILL NUMBER on your check, and make it payable to: City of Newton.

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CITY OF NEWTON
PO BOX 9137
NEWTON MA 02460-9137

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Dear Property Owner,

We have good news: the City of Newton is beginning a Water Meter Replacement Program.

This very important project includes the installation of new water meters, new transponders (sometimes called the meter transmission unit (MTU)) and a new data collection system.

This will begin the process of eliminating the estimated water and sewer bills that many Newton property owners have been receiving due to the issues with the meter transponders. Newton's Utility Department has already begun replacing some meter transmission units (MTU) with new ones, resulting in actual water consumption reads being sent to our Billing Division.

Estimated Reads Calculation Explanation

As a result of the Water Meter Replacement project and new transponders being installed, we anticipate some properties that have received multiple water/sewer bills with *estimated* reads will receive a catch-up bill. (In other words, the actual read when the new transponder is installed may be higher (or sometimes lower) than the estimated reads.)

Please know that the *water meters* have been accurately reading water usage throughout your estimated read period; the transponders just have not been automatically transmitting the information to our Billing Division.

If you have received an estimated bill, the city will perform a daily analysis of the water consumption to ensure that any catchup bill accurately reflects the appropriate rate tiers for water through the estimated read period. (The City of Newton charges different rates based on the amount of water used; these are called rate tiers.)

Once your new meter and MTU are installed, your next water/sewer bill will be based on the actual meter read.

If the actual meter read is higher (or lower) than the estimates, the Water/Sewer Billing Division will run a daily analysis of all water/sewer bills for the period that you received estimated bills to ensure that a catchup bill correctly accounts for the rate tier and the price of the water at the time of consumption.

12-Month Payment Plan

If you have a catchup bill because the actual read is higher than the estimates, the City is offering customers two payment options.

One agreement /payment option spreads the balance owed equally over 12 months. The other payment option would allow for minimal monthly payments for 11 months with a final balloon payment in month 12.

Both payment options do not charge interest for that twelve-month period.

Customers can request either option via email at waterbilling@newtonma.gov or in person at the Water Billing Department located in Newton City Hall at 1000 Commonwealth Avenue, Newton.

If your actual read is LOWER than the estimates, the City immediately process a refund.

Customer Portal

One of the benefits of the new water meter system is the addition of a customer portal, which allows all customers to monitor their water usage in real time and set alerts for increased usage. Customers that set alerts in the portal and the City will be able to identify leaks and excessive water usage.

During the appointment when a new water meter is installed, the meter installation technician will ask property owners if they would like to sign up for the portal and will record the associated e-mail address. If you opt not to sign up for the customer portal during the installation of the meter, the City will publicize other options on how to sign up for the customer portal at another time.

Thank you for your patience and understanding during your water meter upgrade.

Water Meter Information

1) History

From 2010 through 2012, the City replaced residential water meters and installed water meter reading transmission units (MTUs) on the outside of each building to streamline the billing process. The MTUs allow Newton's Department of Public Works employees to remotely collect the water usage data for billing without entering homes. The MTUs worked well until 2019 when a number of MTUs began to malfunction and did not transmit readings. The manufacturer of the MTUs was unable to provide the required number of replacement MTUs due to significant supply chain issues and the vendor is no longer supporting the hardware/software.

Despite the MTU malfunctions, the water meters continue to accurately record water usage.

The City made the decision to replace the meter system in every residential and commercial property. In the Spring of 2022 in line with MassDEP's recommendation of meter replacement every 10 years.

The City is using the Houston-Galveston Area Cooperative (HGAC) to purchase Neptune water meters. The HGAC is a nationwide government procurement service that local governments are eligible to purchase through. All contracts available through HGAC have been awarded through a public competitive procurement process.

The meter supplier, Neptune, is a reputable, long-standing national company that all updates to meters and MTUs are backwards compatible.

The City bid and awarded the meter installation contract to Baystate Winsupply Company as they were the qualified and the low bid. The contractor began replacement of the gateways for the new meters in the Fall of 2022. The residential meter/MTU replacements began in May of 2023.

2) Meter Replacement Program information

We are over 28% complete with the meter replacements. The contractor is currently replacing an average of 500 meters per week.

When a meter is replaced, the City takes a photo of the water service pipes, water usage and identification number on the "old" meter, and the newly installed meter. We keep the old meters for two billing cycles.

Customer Portal Information – Please see attached flyer.

Please click the below link for a dashboard of the Water Meter Replacement Project progress:

<https://apexmapping.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/109a19a3a1fe415ea15749f1d862e7a3>

3) Estimated billing protocol:

Estimated bill examples and explanation of our notification (photos) attached.

a. Statistics

- i. # bills per quarter – 29,518**
of quarterly estimated bills – 14,103
of quarterly customer provided actual reads – 179
- ii. # of payment plans – 59**

b. Overestimated

Any customer that provides an actual read and it is determined that they received an overestimated bill will receive a letter stating that the bill was overestimated and that the bill was reduced by the appropriate amount. If the customer has already paid the bill, a credit appears on their next bill. The customer has the option of requesting a refund of the credit balance through the Treasury Department.

c. Underestimated

Notification is sent to every customer that submits an actual read.

PROCESS FOR ACTUAL READS THAT ARE UNDER 50 HCFS:

If the city receives the read within 10 days of the close of the billing cycle, the bill is adjusted to reflect actual usage. If not, the Billing Office notices the customer that for the City to ensure that the customer receives a bill based on actual usage, an actual reading needs to be sent to the billing office of within 10 days of the billing cycle. Instruction on when and how to send the actual read is provided to each customer.

PROCESS FOR ACTUAL READS THAT ARE 50 HCFS AND ABOVE:

Customer is informed that the read is significantly higher, and the City is scheduling the customer for expedited replacement of meter/MTU. It is important to note that the customer will need to make appointment for replacement once they receive notification from the contractor. If there is an issue with the meter replacement, the Utilities Division will replace the meter

transmission unit to ensure that the customer will receive actual reads going forward.

4) CATCHUP BILL/DAILY ANALYSIS

Customers may receive a “catchup” bill once they receive the water/sewer bill that accurately reflects the amount owed for actual water usage. The City performs a daily analysis of the water consumption to ensure that any catchup bill accurately reflects the appropriate historical rate tiers for water through the estimated read period.

5) PAYMENT PLAN

The City offers two options for a one-year zero interest free payment plan for all catchup bills. Property owners may pay in equal amounts over twelve months or wait until the end of the twelve months and pay in full.

If customers are unable to pay the full amount at the end of the twelve-month plan, a municipal lien may be placed on the property, accruing interest until settled by the property owner.

If the city were to offer a payment plan that extends beyond a year, the City would lose the ability to lien the property in order to collect what is owed if a customer is unable to make payments.

6) Actual Bill after Meter Replacement

Please see attached handout that customers receive at time of meter replacement. It provides explanations of the estimated reads calculation, daily analysis, and information on the 12-month payment plan.