

Update for City Water Customers from Don Greeley, Director

As you know, a few months ago we made a series of mistakes in the water meter reading and billing process. Almost 3,000 water accounts were estimated for an extended amount of time. A number of customers unexpectedly received bills with a “back billed” amount. Because they had not been notified, they were understandably quite upset. While we worked to identify and resolve their concerns, we put the entire process on hold.

Now that we have found and fixed the root causes, we'd like to explain how that happened. We also want to share the changes we've made to keep it from happening again and describe our plan to limit the financial burden on the affected customers.

We estimated bills for too long.

Estimated billing is common in the utility industry. We use it when actual meter readings aren't available—usually because a meter is damaged, isn't transmitting data, or is inaccessible due to surrounding debris or vegetation. Rather than hold the customer's bill for the next cycle, we look at the most recent available water-use history, work out an average, and send an estimated bill until the issue is resolved.

But for approximately 3,000 of our more than 95,000 customers, we estimated bills for too long. During that time, the amount of water those customers used went up and down. Many of their meters—although not transmitting data—did keep an accurate record of their water use. When we began repairing those meters in early 2019, staff in our Customer Billing division reviewed the data, found cases where customers had used more water than they'd paid for, and in July began sending bills for that water.

In our haste, we didn't notify some customers in advance of the bill to explain what was happening. We should have done a better job. As a customer, you have every right to feel frustrated, surprised, and upset if you receive a large bill without warning.

What are we doing to make it better?

First, since we are responsible for this billing mistake, we are limiting back-bill charges to six months. This applies to approximately 600 customers whose meters were recording accurately for the entire estimated time frame, but who received estimated bills that charged them for less water than they were using. Regardless of how many months their bills were estimated, these customers will now pay only six-months of back-billed charges. Those charges will show up on their next water and sewer bill.

We're also mailing letters in advance of the billing with more information, along with a list of [Frequently Asked Questions](#) about estimated billing and this event in particular.

We know unexpected bills can be a financial worry.

We are working to help anyone who needs assistance making these payments. Please contact us if you would like to set up a payment plan. You can reach our Customer Billing staff through Durham One Call at 919-560-1200.

For residential customers, the City's Water Hardship Fund provides assistance to those who need help paying their water and sewer bills. The Durham County Department of Social Services (DSS) handles the fund for the City. You can call DSS at 919-560-8000 for more information. There are other agencies that provide financial assistance as well. You may contact Durham One Call for a list of those agencies.

Not everyone was affected the same way.

It's important to note that not every estimate was too low. Some were too high. Customers who paid estimated bills that charged for *more* water than they actually used have already been given credit on their account. We've also adjusted the accounts of customers whose high bills came from leaks that went undetected during the estimated billing period. Finally, we found some meters had completely stopped working. These didn't record any data. Without a water usage history to review, we have no way to confirm actual water use. There will not be any back billing charges for these customers.

What are we doing to make sure it doesn't happen again?

We have reviewed and improved our billing procedures. We have also made changes to the way we deal with malfunctioning meters. This includes setting a limit on the number of months we allow an account to be estimated.

Again, we're very sorry.

We know we disappointed many of you, and we're sorry. We intend to move forward, continue to review and improve our processes, and do our best to earn back your trust. For now, we thank you for giving us the opportunity to hear your concerns and for showing patience and understanding as we worked to resolve this problem.

Best Regards,

Don Greeley