

**STAFFORD COUNTY
DEPARTMENT OF UTILITIES
ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURES**

PROCEDURE TITLE: *Water/Sewer Bill Adjustment Policy*

PROCEDURE NUMBER: *DOU 2-1*

ADOPTION DATE: *July 23, 2009*

SUPERSEDES: *DOU-1-1*

PURPOSE:

The Bill Adjustment Policy establishes the reasons and procedures for allowable adjustments, which Stafford County can make to a customer's water and/or sewer bill upon the customer's request.

PROCEDURE:

I. Typical Reasons for Adjustment Requests

A. Overestimates

When a water meter cannot be read before a bill is due to be sent out, the billing software estimates the consumption and a bill based upon this estimate is sent to the customer. The customer may also receive an estimated bill if the meter is inaccessible to the Meter Reader or in the case of a broken meter. In some instances, the customer will express concern that the estimated bill is not representative of the actual usage.

B. Misread Meters

Occasionally meters are read incorrectly, the readings are entered into the computer incorrectly, or the meter 'trips'. Although most of these situations are corrected prior to the bill being sent out, a few do get through the system.

C. Excessive Number of Days

If a customer has been billed for more than a normal billing cycle and this has resulted in an excessive bill, the bill may be adjusted.

D. Leaks in the Meter Barrel

Leaks may appear within the meter barrel, either on the County's side of the meter or on the customer's side of the meter. Leaks on the customer's side of the meter will appear on the bill. The County is responsible for all maintenance in the meter barrel; therefore an adjustment of the bill is warranted.

E. Leaks on the customer's side of the meter barrel

Leaks on the customer's side of the meter fall into two categories: (1) "Plumbing Leaks" and (2) "Outside Leaks". Plumbing leaks are any leaks in which the water is returned to the sewer; for example, a leaking toilet or a dripping faucet. Outside leaks do not return water to the sewer, for example, a leak in the service line, hot water tank, etc.

F. Leak in an irrigation system or swimming pool

If there are leaks in an irrigation system or swimming pool, excessive usage may occur without the customer's knowledge and may result in an elevated bill.

G. Finance Charges

Customers are charged a 10% penalty if their payment has not been received when the next bill is prepared. There are instances when a customer feels the finance charge is not warranted and will request an adjustment.

H. Delinquent Balance to New Accounts

A customer who establishes a new account may have a delinquent balance from a previous address on a previous account (which in some cases may be several years old).

I. Reconnection and After- Hours Fees

Customers are charged a reconnection fee to restore service, if they have been disconnected due to issues such as, non-payment, backflow violation, health

hazard, failure to repair a leak etc. An additional after hour's fee is also charged to them if the reconnection request is received after 4:30 p.m. Some customers feel that, due to circumstances beyond their control, these fees are not justified.

J. Unbilled Charges

Unusual circumstances may result in a customer receiving water/sewer service without being billed. In these instances the customer will be billed for up to 3 previous years. If the availability fees have not been paid, they will be billed at the current rate.

K. Other

There are situations when neither the customer nor the Department of Utilities can explain abnormally high water consumption.

All normal outside usage of water (for example swimming pool filling, car washing, lawn watering, etc.) is considered consumption and is not eligible for adjustments.

II. Adjustment Procedures

A. Overestimates

When a water bill is estimated and, is deemed to be too high. The bill will be adjusted to an estimated water usage agreed to by the customer and Customer Service Associate.

B. Misread Meters

When the customer's meter has been read incorrectly, and the bill is significantly higher than average or lower than average, upon verbal request of the customer, the meter reading, and therefore the consumption, will be adjusted accordingly.

C. Excessive Number of Days

The customer will be billed for a normal billing cycle according to our rate structure and the remaining days on the bill will be adjusted to the same rates.

D. Leaks in the Meter Barrel

The customer may receive a courtesy adjustment when there is a leak in the meter barrel. The water and the sewer charges will both be adjusted to the average monthly consumption. A copy of the work order from Field Operations will be used to document the adjustment.

E. Leaks on the Customer's Side of the Meter Barrel

The customer may receive a courtesy adjustment for water leaks on their side of the meter barrel. These adjustments will be based upon the fee structure for their classification. The average for the adjustment will be the customer's seasonal average appropriate to the time of the leak. If the customer's average has not been established the County average of 6,000 gallons will be used, or a calculated average for the number of occupants can be used. If the home is vacant, an average of 2,000 gallons will be used. Any other average used must be explained on the adjustment. Normally, these types of leaks will affect the bills for two consecutive months and both bills will be adjusted.

F. How Averages are Calculated

Water

Seasonal averages will be calculated for the winter rates November through April and for summer rates May through October.

When calculating averages, the amount will be rounded to the nearest 1,000 gallons with .54 and below rounding to the lower value and .55 and above rounding to the higher value.

Sewer

If the sewer portion of the bill exceeds the adjusted water average it will be adjusted to the average plus 20%. On unexplained high consumption the sewer portion of the bill will be adjusted to average.

Inside Plumbing Leaks:

The water has been consumed and has been returned to the sewer. Upon written request of the customer and confirmation that the leak has been repaired, the bill will be adjusted as follows:

Residential Accounts:

(Case 1) – Volume of the leak causes consumption that is more than twice monthly average.

The water portion of the bill will be adjusted to no more than twice the average monthly water consumption. If necessary, the sewer portion of the bill will be adjusted to their average consumption plus 20%.

(Case 2) – Volume of the leak causes consumption that is less than twice monthly average.

If the volume of the leak is less than twice the average consumption, the adjusted volume for water will be the customer's average usage plus ½ of the leak amount. If necessary, the sewer portion of the bill will be adjusted to their average consumption plus 20%.

Non-Residential Accounts:

(Case 1) - The water and sewer will be adjusted to twice the monthly average.

(Case 2) - If the volume of the leak is less than twice the average consumption, the adjusted water and sewer volume will be the customer's average plus ½ of the leak amount.

(Case 3) If an irrigation meter does not have enough history to determine an average, 12,000 gallons will be used.

Outside Leaks:

The water has been consumed, but has not been returned to the sewer. Upon written request of the customer and confirmation that the leak has been repaired, the bill will be adjusted as follows.

Residential Accounts:

(Case 1) - The water consumption will be adjusted to twice the season appropriate average. If necessary, the sewer portion of the bill will be adjusted to their average consumption plus 20%.

(Case 2) - If the volume of the leak is less than twice the average consumption, the adjusted water portion of the bill will be the customer's season appropriate average plus ½ of the leak amount. If necessary, the sewer portion of the bill will be adjusted to their average consumption plus 20%.

Non-Residential Accounts:

(Case 1) - The water consumption will be adjusted to twice their average and the sewer portion of the bill will be adjusted to the average water consumption.

(Case 2) - If the volume of the leak is less than twice the average consumption, the adjusted water portion of the bill will be the customer's

average plus ½ of the leak amount. The sewer portion of the bill will be adjusted to the average monthly water consumption.

G. Leaks in Sprinkler System or Swimming Pool

A repair statement or a statement from the customer with receipts for the items used for the repair and what was repaired must be submitted along with the leak adjustment form.

(Case 1) - The water consumption will be adjusted to twice the customer's summertime average. If necessary, the sewer portion of the bill will be adjusted to their average consumption plus 20%.

(Case 2) - If the volume of the leak is less than twice the average consumption, the adjusted water portion of the bill will be the customer's summertime average plus ½ of the leak amount. If necessary, the sewer portion of the bill will be adjusted to their average consumption plus 20%

(Case 3) If a pool was drained because there was a repair made to a swimming pool liner and the pool had to be refilled, there will be no adjustment. If there was a leaking valve in the pool the account will be adjusted in accordance with the leak policy.

H. Finance Charge

Finance charges on the disputed amount will be exempt while resolving a billing problem. Finance charges will be removed upon the customer's request if the check was in the County's possession before COB of the next bill date. The Customer Service Associate may remove a finance charge, if the customer has not received a finance charge for the previous 12 months and states that he has not received the bill in question or that he mailed the payment more than 7 days prior to the next bill date.

I. Delinquent Balance to New Accounts

Delinquent balances will be moved to the new account and no adjustment will be made.

J. Reconnection and After-Hours Fees

The Customer Service Associate may waive the reconnection fee and/or the after-hours fee if circumstances deem the interruption in service is questionable.

K. Unbilled Services

If the customer was unaware of the charges, a payment arrangement may be made by the customer without penalty charges as long as the payments remain consistent and timely.

L. Other

No adjustments will be made for the filling of swimming pools and/or outside usage of water. Hoses left running will not be adjusted. An unexplained high consumption may be adjusted to the seasonal appropriate average. High consumption for unexplained reasons should only result in one high bill.

Courtesy adjustments for other reasons may be made only on a case by case basis. The customer must make a written request to the Director of Utilities, clearly stating the reason for the requested adjustment.

III. Processing Procedures

The customer must submit a written adjustment request to the Department of Utilities on the attached Leak Adjustment Form 1. The Department of Utilities will evaluate the customer's request on the basis of the criteria in this policy.

Any leak adjustment must be calculated by a customer service associate on the attached Leak Adjustment Form.

Adjustments must be submitted in a timely manner. Leak adjustment requests for a leak occurring more than 6 months prior will be reviewed on a case by case basis.

During the time a customer account is being reviewed for a possible bill adjustment the customer will make average payments and a flag will be put on the account to avoid service disconnection due to a delinquent bill.

After the account has been adjusted the customer will be permitted to make payment arrangements without penalty charges.

All adjustments must be approved by a supervisor. Adjustments of over \$1,000 require the approval of the Assistant Director of Utilities/Engineering. Adjustments of over \$5,000 require the approval of the Director of Utilities.

IV. Limitations

A. Number of Adjustments

The department will only approve one adjustment every three years for an inside-plumbing leak and/or the water portion of an outside leak unless, on a subsequent leak, the entire line is replaced or the customer gets approval from the department director. Adjustments for unexplained high consumption, sprinkler system leaks or pool leaks will only be approved once every 5 years. There are no limits to the number of adjustments which can be made for other types of leaks. Adjustments for the sewer portion of an outside leak will be approved unless the customer has not repaired the leak within two weeks of written notice from the County.

B. Adjustment Period

Leak adjustments will be made for the period from when the leak started to two weeks after the customer becomes aware of a potential leak. In most cases this will not exceed two billing periods. If the customer requests an adjustment exceeding two billing periods, an explanation must be made on the leak adjustment form indicating the reason.

Failure of a customer to repair a water service between the water meter and the premises within two weeks of written notice from the County may result in penalty charges in accordance with Section 25-97 of the Stafford County Code. These charges are a minimum of \$25 per day.