

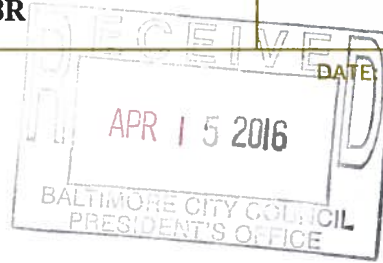
FROM	NAME & TITLE	Rudolph S. Chow, P.E., Director
	AGENCY NAME & ADDRESS	Department of Public Works 600 Abel Wolman Municipal Building
	SUBJECT	CITY COUNCIL RESOLUTION 16-0298R

CITY of
BALTIMORE
MEMO



TO

The Honorable President and Members
of the Baltimore City Council
c/o Natawna Austin
Room 400 – City Hall



April 15, 2016

I am herein reporting on City Council Resolution 16-0298R introduced by Council Members Kraft, Young, Branch, Scott, Stokes, Costello, Henry, Reisinger, Clarke, Middleton, Holton, Welch, Curran, and Mosby.

The purpose of this resolution is to request that representatives from the Water Billing Department in the Department of Public Works and the Department of Finance appear before the Council to discuss the recent increase in water bills received by residents since the installation of the BaltiMeter system, the reasoning behind these unexpected increases, and steps to assist residents with unaffordable bills.

The Department of Public Works (DPW) provides water treatment, delivery, maintenance, and support to Baltimore City and Baltimore County, which consists of over 400,000 customer accounts. The Customer Service and Support Division (CSSD) is responsible for meter reading, meter field operations, billing, program management, accounts analysis, and customer service related to billing questions. The CSSD call center handles an average of about 14,000 calls a month. Recently, CSSD has implemented additional methods of customer support to help expedite assistance. This includes the use of a central email address that customers can contact with questions and concerns as well as the ability to efficiently use 311 to handle water billing questions.

DPW is nearing completion of the installation of new water meters along with remote read devices and Automated Metering Infrastructure (AMI) throughout Baltimore City. This new meter reading system allows meters to be read remotely, rather than requiring in-person manual reads. This results in more accurate reads and substantially reduces the need for estimated reads. The new technology also allows for the collection of reads by the hour and records usage over time. With this new detailed data, it is easier to graph usage trends, identify periods of high usage, and identify possible leaks.

In the past when a customer received a bill that was higher than usual, there was often no way to identify why or when the high consumption occurred. With the new meter reading infrastructure in place, it is now possible to identify exactly when a period of high usage may have occurred, whether it be due to a leak, water left running, or an activity or event that required more water than usual. The CSSD agents now have specific timeframe information available as an additional tool to help customers understand their bills and usage. As a result, agents have the tools to provide in-depth assistance to customers over the phone without requiring them to go in-person for a resolution.

As we have been in the process of a massive meter replacement process, there have recently been some issues with bills sent out late and covering time periods longer than the standard 3-4 months. However, this process is currently improving. CSSD has made it a key priority to bill

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accounts and mail bills on a more predictable schedule. In the future, monthly billing will result in improved timeliness, will make it easier for customers to budget for their bills, and will allow customers to identify periods of high usage more quickly.

DPW understands that some customers may have difficulties with bill payments and does offer assistance programs that customers can apply for. This includes the Low Income Senior Citizen Water Discount Program, the Low Income Assistance Program, and the Hardship Exemption Program. In addition, payment plans are available to customers who may have fallen behind on bills or received an unexpectedly high bill.

CSSD is continuing to improve its processes and is committed to providing quality customer service, transparency, and accountability to all customers.

The Department of Public Works will be present at the upcoming hearing on City Council Resolution 16-0298R to discuss the process of water billing and customer support.

Sincerely,



Rudolph S. Chow, P.E.
Director

RSC/KTO:ela