



Thousands of Cleveland-area residents billed wrongly for water this summer

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PD file

Many Northeast Ohio residents who expected a summer sprinkling discount were overcharged. CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The Cleveland Division of Water incorrectly billed tens of thousands of customers eligible for a summer sprinkling discount given by the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District. No one knows how much money is involved.

Although the district already has lowered hundreds of customer bills, officials said some others were undercharged in the mess.

Who is to blame depends on whom you ask.

A sewer district official said the water department's new \$29 million billing system erroneously calculated the discount for 180,000 residential customers.

A water department spokesman said information plugged into the computer came from the sewer district.

Critics contend nothing much has worked right at the water department for some time. It was a target of an 18-month string of stories that started early last year in The Plain Dealer detailing customer complaints of inaccurate bills, faulty meters and poor customer service.

Water officials maintain things are getting better, yet customer beefs continue. And, the same officials who say the department is turning around had predicted the new billing system would make a lot of the problems go away.

The water department has 1.5 million customers in 70 communities, and bills for the sewer district.

Jennifer Demmerle, the sewer district's finance director, said the sprinkling program typically saves customers a total of \$3.5 million a year on their sewer bills.

The sprinkling program recognizes that people use more water in summer for lawns, gardens and pools -- water that does not go down drains and require treatment at sewer plants. So the sewer bill is reduced accordingly for those signed up for the program. The water department, meanwhile, charges customers for all water that is used.

The calculation for the sprinkling discount is based on the difference in usage from the "summer months" of May through September and the "winter" months of October through April. Customers normally receive a discount only if they use more water in summer than winter.

Demmerle said the water department's new billing computer did not calculate actual winter averages, and instead used a default number. The system went online in September, 2009.

She said while adjusting 180,000 accounts is impractical, "we'll do everything we can to get customers the credits they deserve."

Bills already have been lowered by a total of \$45,000 for 614 customers who filed complaints, Demmerle said.

Demmerle said the water department's computer was reprogrammed last month and tests are being run to determine if the problem has been solved.

Alan Seifullah, a spokesman for the water department, said it is not unusual for customers to be overbilled

or underbilled.

"If the system is working correctly, over the course of a few bills it should even out," he said.

Mayor Frank Jackson assigned one of his top deputies, Darnell Brown, this summer to oversee reform in the water department. Brown reported to a City Council committee last week that some progress had been made.

The water department and its new computer is particularly an unpopular target in Strongsville these days. The department has provided billing for 5,700 households connected to the southwestern suburb's sewer system since 2007.

Mayor Thomas Perciak said none of those customers eligible for the sprinkling program has gotten the discount since the switch to the new system. That came on the heels of another billing glitch that overcharged some Strongsville customers for sewer usage.

The city has worked with more than 500 residents trying to get their sewer bills adjusted. More than 50 showed up at City Hall on Friday with complaints, he said.

Perciak said he and his staff have even gone to water division offices trying to get the problem rectified. The mayor said that even though his own sewer bill is incorrect, he's paid it.

"I had no more strength to want to go down there and deal with it," Perciak said. "I'm hoping the computer picks it up and selects it out as being wrong."

Seifullah said the water department is working with Strongsville to correct problems.

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