

Stop These Gross Over-Charges for City Water

The meeting which Council has called for Tuesday to act upon taxpayer complaints of inequitable water rates is urgently needed.

As disclosed by The Inquirer, some householders have been compelled to pay water and sewer taxes totaling almost as much as their real estate taxes.

Water Bureau officials have admitted that the present rate schedule for unmetered connections is "the most inequitable possible."

Failure to install meters is, of course, the best reason for the owner of the unmetered properties paying more, but there are other factors.

One is the recent listing by the Water Bureau, after a survey, of many fixtures that were previously unlisted and thus not subjected to a tax. Because inspection had not been made for many years, the number of such fixtures was much greater than had been anticipated, and the boost in rates was correspondingly large.

What Council could do is to revise the rates for unmetered connections so as to provide more equitable charges pending the installation of meters.

Universal meterage is the final objective in the matter. It would not only save taxes for

many consumers but-it would save considerable water now wasted.

It has been the fashion at City Hall to blame the individual householders for not installing meters, but there is more to it than that. The Water Bureau is so slow in processing applications for installations that these have piled up, causing long delays. In addition many property owners have found it difficult to obtain plumbers who would handle the work at a fair price. It is said that some plumbers have jumped the price from \$35 to \$75. The Chief of the Water Bureau has said it would take five years to supply the entire city with meters.

That appears unreasonably long, and Council should seek to expedite the installations and at the same time promote arrangements for a standard installation price.

Meanwhile the Water Bureau announced that persons applying for meters prior to November 30 will be placed on the meter rate January 1, whether or not installation is completed, is helpful.

Many water consumers have suffered from suddenly boosted meter costs, and the city should do everything possible to help them by facilitating the transfer to lower meter rates.

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amounts of the bills will range up to 22 1/2 percent above that paid last year. The new rate charges consume 48 cents for each 1000 cubic feet above the minimum.

MORE PROTESTS COMING

City Hall officials predicted that as the number of bills sent out to metered, across the board, the protests against the new water-sewer charges would "jump fourfold."

Schmucker said staff had sent only 1800 bills to "some consumers in the 13th Ward in the Northeast. And we are getting complaints."

Schmucker said his office has approximately 20,000 more bills to be mailed. "Most of these are in the same 33rd Ward, or for a while we will be getting complaints from that section of the city."

MINIMUM SLASHED

Prior to Jan. 1, consumers were allowed 50,000 gallons annually for their \$8 minimum bill. Under the change, this was slashed to 40,000.

It was pointed out that since the present sewer charge is 30 percent of the water rate, the ordinance likewise boosted the sewer rents.

"This slash in the minimum was enacted to reduce an earlier 23 percent, across-the-board" increase that met with such a wave of public disapproval that it was discarded.

NO CHANGES IN SIGHT

Despite this unfavorable reaction City Hall apparently does not contemplate any immediate change.

Assistant City Solicitor Herman Schwartz said "it would be impossible to reduce the current water and sewer rates without jeopardizing the city's water improvement program and the city's borrowing power."

"With the new water rate sent into effect," Schwartz added, "the city went into court and obtained permission to exclude an additional \$100,000 in new water debt from the city's borrowing power. The city anticipates spending an additional \$30,000,000 within the next three or four years."

Schwartz added that the new rates will produce an additional \$1,000,000 in revenue to maintain the present system and allow the city to amortize both its water and sewer bonds.

METER READERS BUSY

Taylor said his staff of meter readers, working the city by wards, would take months more to complete their job. Some of the meters, he said, will not be ready until the fall.

Schmucker's job of billing those exceeding the minimum will not be completed until near the end of the year.

New complaints continued to arrive from householders in unmetered properties, Taylor said re-inspection of thousands of properties throughout the city disclosed that in many dwellings additional outlets had been added to the water system without official notification to the Water Bureau.

BASIC FEE CHARGE

The basic flat charge for unmetered dwellings is \$12.50, regardless of the amount of water used. This includes the 25 percent increase which was discarded for metered properties. The number of faucets and other outlets figure in the total amount of the bills.

Taylor said that during the past year 15 inspectors made re-inspections of 5,732 properties.

The reason for some of the increase is growingly protested was the fact that these inspectors uncovered new plumbing fixtures in these dwellings that have never been taxed in previous years, Taylor added.

URGED TO GET METERS

Taylor believes that the solution for these unmetered users is to have their properties metered. "They would get the benefits of a lower rate and within four or five years these savings would pay for the initial cost of installation."

Taylor also advocates that the city add \$2.50 yearly for meter service. At present the city services meters but the average cost to the householder when one goes wrong is \$8.

Water Chief Offers Plan To Cut Bills Council Arranges Meeting to Debate Whole 'Hot' Issue

A way out for Philadelphians confronted by enormous increases in unmetered water bills was disclosed yesterday by Elbert J. Taylor, chief of the Water Bureau.

He also hinted that a city-wide reduction in the rate was possible.

Any householder who applies for a water meter by Nov. 30 will get the metered rate (minimum charge \$8 annually) on Jan. 1 whether or not a meter is installed by that time, Taylor told a stormy meeting of City Council's Finance Committee.

His hint that a rate reduction was possible drew a bitter rebuke from Councilman Clarence K. Crossan, chairman of the committee, but so many Councilmen said their constituents were up in arms at the water bills revealed by Taylor's disclosure that a full-dress caucus on the whole issue by the entire Council was called for Tuesday at 10 A.M.

YIELD TO PRESSURE

Water charges were not on the agenda of the committee session in Room 406 at City Hall but the discussion by Taylor and Crossan's disclosure that gross inequities exist and some householders are paying water-sewer bills as large as 53 percent of their real estate taxes apparently forced hurried consideration of the problem.

Both Thomas Buckley, Director of Public Works, and Taylor were called to the session and the cross-examination was vigorous.

Taylor again admitted that "the present unmetered rate schedule is about the most unreasonable that could be devised," and also admitted that 40,000 water meters have been up awaiting repairs at his bureau at 29th and Cambria sts.

Crossan opened the session by asking if the bills now being sent out are correctly made under the increases voted by Council. Taylor said the increases, doubling and tripling sewer charges, were correctly calculated and thus far "the percentage of error has been small."

"Is it true that water meters are not being installed because they are generally available?" Crossan asked Taylor hedged. "There's no indication that meters are not available. Applications now on file for the Receiver of Taxes office so that permits do not go out as quick as we would like," he said.

that one, and Assistant City Solicitor Herman Schwartz said that "although the rates themselves aren't excessive, there's no uniform pricing system, and the increases are in many cases due to discovery of water-using fixtures not previously reported for all, there's a minimum of \$8 for 4000 cubic feet of water a year."

"THERE'S NO SUCH THING"

But if you have no meter, there's no such thing as an \$8 rate, Councilman George Maxman snapped.

"We were told," he said, "that the rates are going to produce an approximate increase of 25 percent. We were told nothing about the increases being tripled, and in some cases quadrupled. These rates are unfair and away out of line. In the light of what has happened in the case for the new rates was not presented to us in a proper way."

Maxman said "unscrupulous plumbers are milking our people and there must be some way to protect them."

"I know of identical houses," he said, "and in one of them the rate for water this year went from \$21.60 to \$72.15 in the other house the rate, rate was only from \$8 up to \$21.60."

"MOST UNREASONABLE"

"The unmetered rate schedule is about the most unreasonable that can be devised," Taylor said in answer. "But the metered schedule is very fair."

It was at this point that Taylor said "it's entirely up to City Council if the present rates are amended."

"This seemed to upset Crossan, who said "Any reduction in rate would seriously upset our financial picture."

load is placed upon unmetered consumers, the number of meters served is increasing.

No one who pays for a meter would permit it to be taken off.

If that was the total bill, a sum is too little for it."

In addition to a flat sewer connection charge, I also advocate the metering of all water used with a monthly bill which would permit 600 gallons, six gallons cent. Readings and billing, be made quarterly, with serv to discontinued if the bill is not paid within the next 90 days.

Drastic, perhaps, but it is true that City's water was being paid for by the improvements can be made, and the quality of water made more palatable.

My conclusion, after perusing some check sheets in a branch office of the Receiver's office, is that the majority of property owners pay too little for water, and for these vital services.

H. L. Matisinger
Camden, N. J.

CAN'T GET PLUMBERS

Buckley interjected that "one reason for the lag in installation of meters is householders' inability to get plumbers, and the fact that they have jumped their prices on the job."

"Isn't it true," Councilman Louis Menna said, "that plumbers have raised the price for the job from \$35 to \$75 and in some cases as high as \$100?"

Buckley said he couldn't answer.

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Plumbers Blame City on Meters

High Cost of Water Work is Protested

The high cost of water meters is not due to the greed of plumbers but to the inefficiency of city bureaus that control meter installations, meter plumbers asserted today.

The charge was made by a delegation of 25 plumbers who demanded, and got, a hearing from Council resident Frederick D. Garman just before Council went into caucus to review Philadelphia's entire water rent policy.

The caucus was agreed on last week after a mounting wave of taxpayers' protests against inequitable rate increases, particularly for unmetered water. Political leaders said that unless something is done there may be reprisals at the polls in the municipal election this fall.

Group Is Angry

It was an angry group of plumbers that descended on Garman. Their ire was directed primarily against Councilman Louis Menna, who asserted last week that householders have been delayed in installing meters because plumbers have "jumped the price" for meter installations from \$35 to \$75 and more.

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Rate Fought Residents

sewer rates, signed by 71 residents of Hunting Park area, was sent to the city accompanied by a letter signed by Mrs. Sarah Ward, 2243 Yelland st., which stated that the \$12 sewer rent for four-room houses on Yelland and Duffin sts. "is too much."

She said the protesters would understand the increase if the sewers were new, but these "sewers have been here for years."

BILLS TANTASTIC

At the same time, James A. Finnegan, chairman of the Democratic City Committee, informed Council he had received a large number of complaints from small home owners whose water supply is unmetered, charging that some of the combined sewer and water bills appear "to be tantastic."

In the 1900 block of S. Salford st., Finnegan said, owners of five-room and both houses received water and sewer bills of \$40.00. In the 1800 block of S. Ceel st., the bills ranged from \$29 to \$47.25.

URGES COUNCIL PROBE

"I can't see how City Council can justify a policy of seeking a small home owner who uses unmetered water," continued Finnegan, "while at the same time permitting a large water user to defraud the city and in some cases to pay nothing at all for the use of water."

He urged Council to conduct its own investigation of the Water Bureau now that the special Grand Jury has been discharged. He also asked Council to amend the sewer and water rents of unmetered properties to bring them in line with the rates charged in metered premises.

Metered Water Bills Bring More Protests Against Higher Rates

Although "only a sample" of bills showing water rates for metered properties has been mailed, City Hall is already engulfed in clamorous protests from householders against the boost in charges, which became effective last Jan. 1.

The protests from property owners who have equipped their new and further harassment for clerks already under a bombardment of an average of 300 complaints a day from owners of unmetered houses.

COUNCIL MEETS TUESDAY

These unmetered houses have been hit with an increase in water and sewer rates as much as three and four times the old charges. Revelation by the Inquirer of the householders' burden thus created has forced City Council to schedule a session for 10 A. M. next Tuesday to consider the whole problem of water rates.

It was Raymond W. Schmucker, chief clerk of the Water Assessment and Sewer Rent Division of the Department of the Receiver of Taxes, who said yesterday that "although we have sent out only a sample of the kind of bills that we are making up, complaints from metered properties already have started to come in."

City Council, last December, enacted an ordinance slashing the amount of metered water allowed under the minimum charge of \$8.

Elbert J. Taylor, chief of the Bureau of Water, said meter readers have covered about 50 percent of the kind of bills that we are making up, complaints from metered properties already have started to come in.

Taylor said the increases in the

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Unfair Water Charges

If there is unfairness in water and sewer charges for certain homes without meters, it may be that the owners are beneficiaries rather than victims.

The owner of a metered property pays in proportion to the amount of water taken from the water system and discharged into the sewer system. He has an incentive to be careful in the use of water, and this usually puts him on guard against waste. This, in turn, tends to reduce city operating costs for water supply and sewage disposal.

The flat-rate properties pay by a formula that means nothing in terms of water drawn, and gives no incentive to conserve. Occupants of such property unquestionably draw more water than if they were on meters. It is no more than fair that they pay more than the metered consumers.

Many unmetered properties cheat through use of fixtures unlawfully installed, for which the city makes no charge because it doesn't know about them.

The remedy for any unfairness that may exist lies in metering all properties rather than in encouraging unmetered properties to continue without meters by reducing their rates.

These days a property without a water meter is as absurd as one without a gas or electric meter.