

Let's Talk About...

UTILITIES: THE BILLING PROCESS

(Utility policies, procedures, and rates have changed over time to address changing conditions in our city. This is the first in a series of articles written to alleviate any misunderstandings or confusion about those changes and to dispel the misinformation frequently posted on social media.)

The utility billing process is initiated on the 15th of each month with the reading of approximately 1550 water meters. The readings are uploaded into the "Logics" utility billing system, triggering a number of reports, including Inactive Accounts with Usage, Accounts with Very High Usage, and Meters with No Readings. Service orders are issued to resolve these anomalies before the accounts are updated. At the end of the month, the utility bills are printed and mailed. The average postage cost for each mailing is approximately \$450.

Resident receive their printed utility bills around the first of each month. Payment is due by close-of-business on the 15th of the month, or COB of the next business day if the 15th falls on a weekend or holiday. This means utility bills are always one month behind actual service. Failure to receive a printed bill does not negate responsibility for paying that month's bill; the Utility Billing clerk can provide the amount due or a duplicate bill, if necessary.

Utility bill payments may be made by check, cash, or money order – all of which may be paid by mail, by using the City Hall Drop Box, or at the Utility Billing desk – or by credit card - which may be online at www.HamiltonTexas.com, by telephone, or in person – or by bank draft, which can be set up at any time.

Payments not received by close-of-business on the 15th incur a 10% Late Penalty. On average, 200 accounts will be assessed the 10% Late fee. If payment is still not received by start-of-business (i.e. 7:30 a.m.) on the 26th (Cutoff Day), a Non-Payment Penalty of \$50 is assessed and water service is discontinued until full payment is received. However, even though water usage is cut off, charges continue to accrue for garbage, sewer, the meter fee and the base water fee as long as the account remains open. Each month, approximately 35 accounts are on the Cut-Off List; the majority are paid within a few days and service is restored.

Every attempt is made via the Logics automated call-out system to notify residents prior to the Late fee and the Non-Payment fee being applied. However, the automated call-out system is, to put it kindly, temperamental – sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. While Logics continues to work on the problems, residents should not rely on a courtesy call to remind them to pay their utility bill. Also, many accounts do not have a current phone number. It is to your benefit to have a current phone number associated with your account, especially when we have a water shut-down and try to notify residents in that neighborhood.

By city ordinance, and for health and sanitation reasons, city residents are required to have water, sewer, and garbage service. If payment is not received within 7 business days after Cutoff Day, the account is closed, the deposit is applied to the balance, and a Notice of Violation is sent. If that location continues to be occupied, the resident must open a new account to restore service or a citation is issued. On average, 5 – 7 accounts are closed each month due to non-payment. By and large, the occupant moves out, leaving the amount currently due and the Final Bill unpaid.

There is an exception to the process outlined above. If the account owner is age 60 or over and has turned in a Delayed Payment Form, that account owner has 25 days from the date the bills are mailed in which to make a payment without any penalty. This means never being charged the 10% Late Penalty. The Delayed Payment Form is available at the Utility Billing desk at City Hall. Every account owner aged 60 and over who is not on bank draft is encouraged to take advantage of this “just in case” opportunity. However, payment must be received by 7:30 a.m. on the 26th (Cutoff Day), or the 60-and-over account owner is subject to the same \$50 Non-Payment Penalty and service disruption as everyone else.

There is not a single city employee who enjoys assessing penalties or discontinuing service. These are methods of last, but necessary, resort. Each month, the City of Hamilton receives a water bill from the Upper Leon River Municipal Water District and a garbage bill from Waste Connections. For the city to pay its bills each month, residents must pay theirs.