

## **SURVEY: CHELSEA WATER AND SEWER BILLS ABOUT AVERAGE**

City Manager Jay Ash says there are few items for which the City strives to be average. He was comfortable, though, with a survey just released by the MWRA Advisory Board which indicates that local water and sewer rates were about average for 2009.

“We’re constantly asking ourselves how we can do things more efficiently, yet maintain and improve upon quality. Our success in continuing to keep water and sewer rates around average, done while making dramatic improvements to the reliability and safety of our water and sewer system, is another indication that we are meeting that challenge,” boasted Ash.

The MWRA Advisory Board, an independent board established to represent the interests of sixty MWRA communities and their ratepayers, publishes its survey every November. The 23rd “Annual Water & Sewer Retail Rate Survey” reports that the local bill for the average household using 120 hundred cubic feet of water and sewer service is \$1,225, 2% above the \$1,196 average annual bill for the 56 communities surveyed. Of the 55 other communities, 30 have bills higher than Chelsea.

“Keeping prices average is only great if you’re getting above-average service. Our system’s come a long way from the days where nearly nothing was spent to maintain it, and the results continue to show it, with both fewer service problems and moderating costs,” said Council President Leo Robinson, expressing his pleasure with a capital improvement program process that includes regular water and sewer maintenance projects.

“It’s the old ‘an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure’ story,” added Councillor Calvin Brown about the capital improvements to the water and sewer system. “Yes, we’re spending millions on the system, but by doing so we’re saving ratepayers millions more. That’s a winning formula.”

Local water and sewer rates include funding for those capital projects designed to maintain and improve the system, wholesale charges from the MWRA and the personnel and other overhead needed to manage what is a \$14.8 million system for the current fiscal year (FY’10). Ash said that about two-thirds of expenses pay for actual water and sewer charges, while the remaining one-third pays for the capital improvements and personnel costs of the system. Revenues to support those expenditures are almost exclusively derived from ratepayer charges.

“We’re still trying to catch-up on deferred maintenance from yesteryear,” said Ash, while noting that some water and sewer lines are actually more than 100 years old. “Doing so is the most expensive part of our capital efforts yearly, but by doing so, we have substantially increased the reliability of the system. At the end of the day, the reliability has to be our top concern.”

Ash says that water and sewer charges should remain around average in the coming years.

“I don’t expect to see us deviating from the MWRA average that much. All communities are facing the need to make massive capital expenditures to maintain their systems. If anything, we’re a bit ahead of some of our neighbors, but there is just so much that still needs to be done. We’ll continue to balance that need versus affordability,” commented Ash.

“That would be a good thing,” said Councillor Paula Barton while noting that Council action late last year is also saving the average single family owner-occupant \$1,547 in property taxes. “Anything we can do to make owning a home here in Chelsea less expensive than elsewhere is always a good thing.”

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