



COMMISSIONER
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978-345-9687 FAX

STREETS & PARKS
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**FITCHBURG DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS
WASTEWATER DIVISION**

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: What is an "abatement"?

A.: In the context of sewer use billing, an abatement is a lessening or reduction in the billable amount for the sewer use billing period, for specific policy approved causes, where sewer billing cannot be fairly derived from the customer's water meter reading.

Q: What is a "billing unit" on my bill?

A.: The "billing unit" is one hundred cubic feet ("CCF" as a short-hand unit of measure term), or approximately 750 gallons. Two billing units would be equal to 2 CCF, or 200 cubic feet, or approximately 1,500 gallons.

Q: Why is my bill higher than before?

A.: The sewer billing rates have not changed since July 1, 2011, when the rate increased from \$4.35/CCF to \$7.30/CCF. At the time this change was made, billing was being performed quarterly. At the beginning of 2012, the billing was changed to monthly from quarterly, but the billing rates (which depend on water usage) remained unchanged.

If you notice an apparent billing increase, it is because your property's water meter is reading more flow passing through the meter than before. If you are not increasing your water use (lawn or garden watering, water use for home maintenance, automobile washing, etc.), this would suggest that there are plumbing leaks on the property side of the water meter, and these leaks are "read" as water usage by the customer. Increased water use consumption by customers, due to plumbing leaks, lawn, house, property or automotive maintenance, are not abatable conditions, and customers will be billed for sewer use on these meter readings. (Refer to the DPW Wastewater Division's Sewer Billing Abatement Policy for details.)



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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q.: Will the sewer rates be increased again?

A. The rates increases, that took place in July 2011, were primarily in response to large scale and large cost capital projects that the City was required to undertake in conjunction with the City's Consent Decree with the U.S. EPA, the MassDEP, and the U.S. Department of Justice. Capital projects were required for both the sewer collection system and at the City's wastewater treatment plant. In addition to required projects, organizational, personnel staffing and equipment procurement was also required, and plans and studies were also required of the City in the Consent Decree.

The rates increases from 2011 was only accounting for the preliminary group of projects, personnel staffing, equipment and studies, and was planned to account for approximately the initial \$30,000,000 investment. This preliminary rate increase (2011) was not planned to fund and finance all funding requirements for projects, studies, plans, equipment.

Additional work and projects, beyond initial \$30,000,000 investment, are required and are incorporated into the Consent Decree, and will need to be financed. Within the next couple years, the City will evaluate the additional funding requirements, and will conduct a sewer user rate study to properly fund those funding needs, including the DPW Wastewater Division's annual operational and capital renewal funding needs.

Q.: My property is only on City sewer, but is not on City water. Why is my monthly billing at \$60.83/month?

A.: The industry average for residential water/sewer use is 120 CCF per year. The annual usage the City uses for statistical average is 100 CCF per year. Dividing this figure by 12 monthly billing periods, gives an average monthly usage of 8.333 CCF/month. At the current sewer billing rate, of \$7.30/CCF, this results in the monthly billing rate that is assigned to sewer-only accounts \$60.83/month.

Sewer-only customers have the option of installing a radio-read water meter on their water supply well (at the customer's expense). If a sewer only customer installs a meter, the sewer billing for the account would be based on the meter reading, and



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would follow the sewer billing process. This would be advantageous to a sewer-only customer who believes that they use less than 8.333 CCF per month. Sewer-only customers seeking to pursue a meter installation, should contact the Fitchburg Water Department (Tel. No.: 978-345-9616) for information on the meter, and costing.

Q.: What is the billing process, and is there a minimum charge?

A.: Yes. There is a minimum charge. Sewer customers are billed a flat rate of \$18.85 per month for sewer usage from 0 to 3 CCF. Sewer customers that use in excess of 3 CCF are billed for the full amount used that month at the billing rate of \$7.30/CCF.

Q.: There are sewer odors in my home. Should I call the City?

A.: Residential & commercial plumbing systems have water traps built into the systems to prevent sewer gases from migrating into the buildings. Occasionally, on plumbing fixtures that aren't often used, the water in the water trap can dry out and evaporate. Customers should run a gallon or two of water into the drains of fixtures to ensure that water traps have water. If the customers plumbing fixtures do not have water traps, or the water traps don't seem to be working, the customer should contact a licensed plumber to inspect and repair the problem.

Q.: Who owns the sewer piping to my home?

A.: The City owns the sewer mains and sewer manholes in the streets, or in cross-country running sewer right-of-ways. The sewer customer owns, and is responsible for operating, maintaining, repairing and replacing the sewer service pipe that connects the customer's home or building to the City-owned sewer, up to and including the connection to the City-owned sewer.

Q.: Who do I call if there is a sewer service backup in my home or business, or if there is an observed sewer overflow in the street?



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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- A.: The City has implemented a one-call point-of-contact for the public or sewer customers to alert the City of an apparent sewer problem. The public or sewer customers are instructed to contact the Fitchburg DPW Dispatch, at (T) 978-829-1900.

Weekdays (non-holidays) the Fitchburg DPW Dispatch Desk is staffed from 7:00 AM thru 3:00 PM.

After hours on weekdays (non-holidays), on weekends, and on holidays, calls to the (T) 978-829-1900 number will be answered by an answering service, and the call message will be forwarded to the appropriate on-call City staff member. For sewer-related calls, messages will be forwarded to the on-call DPW Wastewater Division on-call Collection System personnel.

- To best help, when contacting the Fitchburg DPW Dispatch (or off-hours answering service) to report observed sewer-issues or overflows, callers should provide the Fitchburg DPW Dispatch desk (or off-hours answering service) with:
 1. Your name and contact telephone number;
 2. Address (if sewer service backup), or location of the overflow (nearest address, or intersection); and
 3. Approximate time the sewer service backup or overflow was first observed.

City DPW Wastewater Division Collection System personnel responding to the site will investigate the City-owned sewers to determine if the source of the problem is in the City-owned sewers, or if the source of the problem appears to be in the sewer customer owned sewer service piping. Responding personnel will contact the caller to relay the findings, and any actions taken. If the source of the problem appears to be in the sewer customer owned sewer service piping, the caller (or customer) will be informed that the issue is in the private, customer owned piping, and that the caller (or customer) will need to contact a plumber to address the issue in the private, customer owned piping.