



**Date:** April 8, 2014

**To:** Thomas J. Bonfield, City Manager  
**Through:** W. Bowman Ferguson, Deputy City Manager  
**From:** Donald F. Greeley, Director, Water Management  
**Subject:** Adoption of Proposed Water and Sewer Rates for FY 2014 - 2015

### **Executive Summary**

In FY 2008 - 2009, Durham's City Council first adopted a tiered rate structure for water volume charges applicable to single family residential customers. The tiered rate structure effectively introduced the concept of "the less you use, the less you pay." Durham's customers have continued to embrace a water efficient ethic during normal times and extended dry periods. Over the past several years, City Council has supported the administration's requests for modest rate increases to cover increasing operating costs and debt service. The rate increases also support Durham's large capital program which focuses on replacement of our aging infrastructure and meeting new regulatory requirements and system growth. Water Management staff have coordinated with Finance Department staff to develop a fiscal strategy providing sufficient funding for operating and capital needs while maintaining favorable debt coverage. This collaboration, including input from the bond advisors, has ensured that Durham's bond rating remains very high.

Staff approached this year's budget cycle with a desire to keep the tiered rate structure in place, while refining costs to reflect not only the departmental needs – operational and capital – but the current economic climate and its impact on Durham's water and sewer customers. To meet these needs, the department proposes modest increases for the water and sewer service and volume charges for FY 2014-2015. The result is an approximate 3% overall increase in the monthly water/sewer bill for the average inside City customer. This proposal also continues the one penny per hundred cubic feet dedicated to watershed protection efforts.

The administration recommends the proposed rates be adopted effective July 1, 2014, with implementation for bills issued on or after August 1, 2014.

### **Recommendation**

The department recommends that City Council adopt an ordinance to change rates for water and sewer service, Section 1, Part 15-104 of the City's fee schedule, effective July 1, 2014. Rates shall be applied to all bills rendered after August 1, 2014.

### **Background**

During FY 2008 - 2009 budget preparation cycle, Department of Water Management staff worked closely with Raftelis Financial Consulting, Inc. (RFC) to develop a tiered rate structure for water consumption. RFC recommended that the tiered structure be applied to individually-metered residential customers because this group comprises the bulk of

seasonal elective water use, such as irrigation and car washing. The rate structure recommended by RFC contained five tiers for single-family residential water users, set rates for all non-residential customers at Tier 3 and set rates for all irrigation-only customers at Tier 5. RFC also proposed continuing modest increases in both water and sewer service charges to more accurately reflect the fixed costs of water treatment and delivery and wastewater collection and treatment while keeping up with inflation.

For FY 2014 - 15, staff recommends modest increases in water and sewer service charges and volume rates resulting in an approximate 3% overall increase in water/sewer bills for inside City customers. This level of funding will meet increasing operational expenses and identified capital improvements while maintaining prudent reserves in keeping with the fiscal strategy developed by Water Management and Finance Department staff. Significant capital improvements to water reclamation facilities to address requirements of the Falls Lake and Jordan Lake rules are planned in several phases over a 20-year planning horizon.

The tiered rate structure has been an effective means of encouraging a water efficiency ethic among customers despite variation in rainfall and levels of water supply lakes. Additionally, the 2008 drought legislation promotes the utilization of tier rate structures in North Carolina cities and utilities. Staff approached this year's budget cycle with the intent to keep the established tiered rate structure in place, while refining the rates within the structure to reflect not only the departmental needs – operational and capital – but the current economic climate and its impact on Durham's water and sewer customers. The proposed rates, developed with the assistance of RFC, continue the one penny per tier fee dedicated to watershed protection efforts as initially adopted in the FY 2011-2012 budget.

The administration recommends the proposed rates be adopted at the May 5, 2014 Council meeting to become effective July 1, 2014 and applied to all bills rendered on and after August 1, 2014.

### **Issues and Analysis**

The proposed rates for individually metered single family residential accounts inside the City are shown in the table. Staff recommends continuing to bill all non-residential customers (multi-family, industrial, commercial and institutional) at the Tier 3 rate and all irrigation-only customers at the Tier 5 rate. Moderate increases are recommended for water and sewer volume charges to cover increasing operating costs due to nutrient removal requirements.

The proposed rates support the FY 2014 - 2015 water and sewer operating costs, capital needs and debt service. The recommended minimum debt coverage ratio is forecast to be met or exceeded with the proposed rates.

The rates for outside-City customers would continue at two times the inside the City rates, as per current policy.

	FY 14 Rates	FY 15 Rates
<b><u>Monthly Water Rates (inside)</u></b>		
Service Charge	\$6.15	\$6.36
Volume Charge - Tiered Rates (per 100 cubic foot - ccf)		
Tier 1 (0 - 2 ccf)	\$1.75	\$1.77
Tier 2 (>2 - 5 ccf)	\$2.63	\$2.67
Tier 3 (>5 - 8 ccf)	\$2.88	\$2.92
Tier 4 (>8 - 15 ccf)	\$3.76	\$3.82
Tier 5 (>15 ccf)	\$5.63	\$5.72
<b><u>Monthly Sewer Rates (inside)</u></b>		
Service Charge	\$7.02	\$7.26
Volume Charge (per ccf)	\$3.75	\$3.89

**Alternatives**

Alternative 1: Do not raise rates. The water and sewer operating costs will be covered with existing rates; however, many of the capital needs will not be funded. A number of the capital needs are regulatory-driven and failure to fund these projects will expose the City to risk of noncompliance in numerous areas. The City may also be subject to fines from the State within 1 to 2 budget cycles if projects are not completed and facilities are not on line by imposed deadlines. The City Council’s approach over the past several years has been the approval of consistent, reasonable rate increases designed to minimize the shock of sporadic rate spikes; these programmed increases are necessary to meet capital funding needs within the 5 year planning horizon. The strategy of not adopting a rate increase this year would be inconsistent with the Council’s approach, the City’s needs and the City’s desire to support increased and enhanced regional watershed protection efforts. Moreover, making up any postponed revenue by larger rate increases in the future could have an unnecessarily severe impact on customers.

**Financial Impact**

The proposed rates support the FY 2014 - 2015 water and sewer operating costs, capital needs and debt service. The targeted debt coverage ratio is met with the proposed rates.

**SDBE Summary**

The Ordinance to Promote Equal Opportunity in City Contracting is not applicable to this item.

**Attachments**

Ordinance to Change Rates for Water and Sewer Service Presentation