



Water Utility Reorganization: What Can Our Customers Expect

Overview

With the City of Columbia’s 2036 Vision, we have committed to lead the way in innovative and high quality municipal services. Improvement efforts that began with the wastewater system through the Clean Water 2020 program are expanding to the City’s drinking water, engineering, customer service and other water utility support groups.

Below are highlights of some of the improvement efforts that will impact our water and sewer customers. While some improvements are still in development, other changes have already taken place that are improving our systems and services. We believe that as we move forward, we will succeed in providing high quality municipal services, efficiently, effectively, and responsively.

Customer Response

Effort	Impact on Customers
<p>Escalated Issue Team: Not all customer issues are created equal; some are more complex and require more experience and insight to work through with a customer. Our Customer Care and Meter Reading groups are adding staff who will focus on customers with complex issues.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Customer Advocate will be assigned to a customer who needs extra assistance and will be the point of contact for that customer throughout the case. • The Meter Maintenance Task Force will be a team of seasoned meter maintenance staff whose primary responsibility will be to fully investigate any meter issues associated with these complex cases. These staff will also be able to educate customers on how meters work and how to identify issues on their property that could contribute to water billing issues. <p><i>Planned: Fiscal Year 2017-2018</i></p>	<p>Dedicated Customer Advocate staff will be the point of contact for customers with complex issues and will work with them throughout the resolution process.</p> <p>Seasoned Meter Maintenance Task Force staff will troubleshoot complex water usage or metering issues. Staff can also provide insight in identifying problems on the property that may be contributing to the issues the customer is facing.</p> <p>Customer Advocate and Meter Maintenance Task Force staff can educate the customer throughout the process in identifying the causes contributing to the water issues and in how to prevent them in the future.</p>
<p>Improved Target Response Time for Rereads: Staff is looking at the process when a customer calls in to dispute a bill and request a reread. The goal is to identify where process improvements and additional resources can reduce response times. Staff anticipates having an improved response time goal, with a plan to meet that goal, by Summer 2017.</p> <p><i>Examining Process Started: July 2016</i> <i>Target Improvement Plan & Goal: Summer 2017</i></p>	<p>This will reduce the amount of time it takes for a meter reread when a customer disputes a bill.</p>

<p>Customer Care & Field Services Staff Training: Customer Care and Field Services staff will receive training to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand their knowledge of City services and available City assistance program • Improve their ability to listen to the customer and meet their needs within the capabilities of City policies • Improve their ability to explain what steps a customer can expect City staff to follow if an issue cannot be immediately resolved • Enhance their ability to educate the customer on tips to prevent high use bills • Convey the care and respect owed to our customers <p><i>Customer Care Training: June-December 2016</i> <i>Field Services Training Start: March 2017</i></p>	<p>More knowledgeable and courteous customer service staff.</p>
<p>Enhanced Citizen Portals: The City will be expanding its online portals. Customers will be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use mobile devices to report concerns with the option to attach pictures and submit location information • Track the status of requests through automated work order management • Chat with Customer Care Representatives from their website or mobile device • Pay their bill with their mobile device <p><i>Planned: Fiscal Year 2017-2018</i></p>	<p>More convenient reporting options for customers.</p>

Meter Reading Auditing Measures

Effort	Impact on Customers
<p>Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI) and High Use Alerts: The City is planning to convert its meter system to an Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI). All analog meters will be replaced with digital meters that collect and transmit real-time water use data to the billing network. The City plans to replace all current meters with AMI meters and set up the data transmission network starting in a phased installation over the next 3-5 years. Work is planned to start in Fiscal Year 2017-2018.</p> <p>Often, the first indication that a customer has a plumbing issue is a high water bill. Because the AMI system will collect water use data in real-time and transmits that data back to the network, customers will be able to receive usage alerts. This should allow customers to be notified that they may have a plumbing problem as early as the same day the problem starts.</p>	<p>AMI and High Use Alerts: Customers will know in real time when they have an issue with their water usage, allowing them to make repairs with minimal wasted water.</p> <p>Pre-AMI High Use Notification: The City will have a way to notify customers of higher than normal use before the customer receives a bill. This will allow them to begin looking for issues with their system or changing water use habits sooner than they might be notified in waiting for their bill.</p>

<p>Pre-AMI High Use Notification: Since AMI will take several years to be installed system-wide, not every customer will have immediate access to the real-time alert option. The City is also looking into ways that meter readers could be alerted of a customer's high use as they take a reading. The goal is to have a means to alert customers of high use before they receive their bill.</p> <p>AMI Feasibility Started: 2016 – ONGOING EFFORT AMI Implementation Beginning: Fiscal Year 2017-2018 (pending Council approval); 3-5 Year Phased Installation Start of Early Notification Planning: February 2017</p>	
<p>Meter Reading Routes: Meter route protocols have changed so no meter reader will read the same route three months in a row.</p> <p>Started: July 2016</p>	<p>This will reduce opportunity for skipped reads to go unnoticed. Customers should see fewer estimated bills.</p>
<p>Weekly Random Meter Route Recheck: A different meter reading route will be randomly selected to be rechecked by staff from a different section (meter maintenance) each week. At least ¾ of the route will be re-read. If discrepancies above a certain level are found, a third staff member will confirm the correct amount.</p> <p>Started: July 2016</p>	<p>Over-time, staff expect to see a reduction in skipped readings and misreads. Customers should see fewer estimated bills.</p> <p>Real Life Impact Example: Staff recently caught two incorrect reads through the auditing process and corrected the usage before the bills were sent to the customers.</p>
<p>Consolidated Skipped Meter Report: Skipped reads are now reported in a consolidated report in addition to a master list of individual accounts. The consolidated report lets staff identify which categories cause the most skips.</p> <p>Started: December 2016</p>	<p>Staff can justify improvements that reduce skips by focusing on the most common causes. Customers should see fewer estimated bills.</p> <p>Real Life Impact Example: A high level of "Cannot locate" causes led staff emphasize locating and marking previously hidden meters. Residents may have noticed an increase in blue marks along the right-of-way which are part of this marking effort.</p>

Departmental Reorganization

Effort	Impact on Customers
<p>Gap Analysis: Working with an outside agency to identify areas department-wide where processes could be improved both in quality of service delivered and in efficiency.</p> <p>The Gap Analysis started as an initiative of the Clean Water 2020 program. In 2016, it was expanded to include all of the</p>	<p>Vision: A high quality product with great customer service.</p> <p>Values: Providing a level of service as if we have direct competition in our service area.</p>

<p>Department of Utilities & Engineering. It continues through the reorganization of the Department of Engineering and the Department of Utility Operations.</p> <p>Capital Improvement Project planning will use more data-driven approaches using customer complaint data, asset age, and other performance indicators to prioritize projects.</p> <p>Started: 2016 – ONGOING EFFORT</p>	<p>Over time, customers will see an improvement in service.</p> <p>Some improvements are already underway as outlined below.</p>
<p>Reorganization: As part of the Gap Analysis, the Department of Utilities & Engineering and Customer Care were reorganized to bring all water and sewer related services, including billing, under one Assistant City Manager. The Assistant City Manager will oversee the:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer Care and Field Services Division <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Billing, meter reading, customer service • Department of Engineering <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Capital Improvement management, floodplain and stormwater management, asset management, strategic planning • Department of Utility Operations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Water treatment plants, wastewater treatment plant, water system, and wastewater system operations and maintenance; regulatory compliance oversight <p>Assistant City Manager Job Posting Closing: February 28, 2017 Reorganization Planning Started: Summer 2016 Effective Date: January 1, 2017</p>	<p>Contacts: Customer contacts should not change. Customers can still call 803-545-3300 to report concerns or ask billing questions.</p> <p>Customer Care and Field Services Reorganization: This elevates customer concern and field service functions higher in the executive management chain for more immediate review and resolution of issues.</p> <p>Creation of Department of Engineering and Department of Utility Operations: This delineates roles and responsibilities of the Directors of these departments for a more streamlined workload and to achieve efficiencies. Over time, customers will see an improvement in service.</p>
<p>Customer Service Process Review: The City will be looking at the entire billing cycle, from the customer’s water use to final bill payment, and identifying ways to improve processes. We will review:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Account Management • Field Services • Meter Data Management • Billing • Payment • Credit and Collections <p>The new Assistant City Manager will be able to use this review and data to implement additional changes and improvements.</p> <p>Review Planning: Underway Review to Start: Spring 2017</p>	<p>This will result in business practice improvements that will improve customer service.</p>
<p>Customer Satisfaction Strategy: Improving overall customer satisfaction levels is one goal of the department-wide Gap Analysis.</p> <p>Redesign of Strategy Started: December 2016</p>	<p>Over time, customers will see an improvement in service and improved responsiveness to billing and water quality inquiries.</p>