



Billing cycles, meter-reading problems may be behind WSSC's high water bills

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WASHINGTON -- This winter, dozens of Montgomery County residents say they got major sticker shock after getting water bills that were double, sometimes even triple, the normal rate.

Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission Spokesman Jerry Irvine says that some of the change could be attributed to the fact that the billing cycle was longer. In other cases, Irvine said, consumers were in fact using more water, and some had previously undiscovered leaks.

The WSSC, which serves Montgomery and Prince George's counties, responded to a number of complaints. Roughly 60 complaints landed on the desk of Montgomery County Councilmember Roger Berliner, whose district includes Bethesda and Potomac. And the answers he got didn't satisfy him or the WSSC customers.



About 10 of those complaints also were received by Montgomery County's Director of the Office of Consumer Protection Eric Friedman, who looked into all the reports. His findings were inconclusive.

"In some cases there probably was a leak; in some cases they probably used a little bit more water," Friedman says.

In other cases, Friedman says, there may have been a flaw in the way the meters were read by WSSC.

"There's just no way to know for sure."

What is clear, says Friedman, is that once the WSSC has concluded that the problem may be on the consumer's end, there's no recourse. Unlike Pepco and Baltimore Gas and Electric, which are regulated by the Maryland Public Service Commission, there is no regulatory authority over the WSSC.

"Ultimately, WSSC holds the cards," he says.

Also, Friedman points out that the WSSC meter readers are confronted by a complicated array of meter types. Some meters are attached to houses and read with one type of reader; others are buried several feet underground. Still other meters are inside homes and call for a meter reader to gain access to a residence. The different technologies could result in meter reader errors, Friedman says.

In a statement released Monday, Berliner called for change.

"As it stands, WSSC is the sole arbiter of whether a bill is correct. Consumers are clearly at a disadvantage and this needs to change. Accordingly, I will be working with our state delegation in the months ahead to create a fair and independent forum that will better serve our County's ratepayers."

Contacted by WTOP for comment, Jim Neustadt, WSSC's director of communications, said in an email he had seen the report, but that WSSC would need more time to analyze the findings.

Neustadt says that the harsh winter weather that resulted in a longer billing period -- and could account for higher bills -- also would result in a shorter billing period in the current cycle, and that a preliminary review of roughly 20 customers is showing lower-than-normal bills are, in fact, showing up.

WTOP's Kate Ryan contributed to this report. Follow [@WTOP](#) on Twitter and [WTOP](#) on Facebook.