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WSSC customers challenging high water bills need arbiter beyond utility, report finds

BY KATHERINE SHAVER June 17 at 5:39 PM

Utility customers in the Maryland suburbs who want to challenge high water bills need a way to dispute those charges outside the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission, according to the Montgomery County Office of Consumer Protection.

The county agency began examining WSSC customer complaints in April, after Council Member Roger Berliner (D-Potomac-Bethesda) said he'd heard from about 50 residents whose winter water bills were so unusually high that they believed they had to be wrong.

The 50 complaints were more than the county has received about WSSC bills over the past 30 years, according to a letter sent from the office's director, Eric Friedman, to Berliner this week.

Customers were most frustrated that they had no way to dispute the bills beyond the WSSC's own appeal process, according to the agency's report.

In most of the 50 cases, WSSC said its bills were accurate, the report said. Possible explanations for the higher bills included the higher use of water by customers, leaks, improper meter reading by WSSC or malfunctioning meters, the report said.

In some cases, the report said, the bills that showed an unusually high amount of water use were followed by bills for normal usage.

"In many cases," the report said, "the underlying cause of any spike in usage will remain a mystery."

WSSC officials have said some customers had unusually high bills this winter because heavy snow made it difficult to reach many meters, resulting in longer than usual billing cycles that covered up to 30 days more water usage. People who stayed home during snow storms also likely used more water than usual by flushing toilets, running washing machines and operating dishwashers more often than if they had been at work or in school, the utility said.

WSSC spokesman Jim Neustadt said Tuesday that the utility needed more time to analyze the report before commenting. Some customers might be seeing lower than usual bills now because this billing cycle is shorter for those who had longer winter billing cycles, he said.

WSSC customers can now appeal bills via the utility's "dispute resolving board" comprised of one WSSC employee and two appointed customers, according to WSSC's Web site. The board's decision is considered final.

Berliner said he plans to work with the county's General Assembly delegation to establish a "fair and independent" forum for WSSC customers to challenge bills.

The WSSC provides water and sewer services to nearly 2 million people in Montgomery and Prince George's counties.

The utility also "gives the appearance" that its meter-reading technology is "antiquated" and more vulnerable to inaccurate readings compared to other local water utilities, the report said.

The report noted that the WSSC relies on older technology that requires meters to be read manually. Other local water utilities use more "sophisticated" technology that allows automated readings as utility workers drive by, the report said.