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## Office of Consumer Protection investigating complaints of high water bills

*Berliner asks agency to examine complaints against WSSC*

By Terri Hogan Staff Writer

“Something is not right.”

In response to the issue of higher-than-normal water bills plaguing many Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission customers, Councilman Roger Berliner (D-Dist. 1) of Bethesda quoted the children’s book “Madeline,” written by Ludwig Bemelmans.

A member of Berliner’s staff said that calls and complaints continue to come into their office. Over the past few weeks, the office has forwarded 49 complaints to the commission to be investigated.

Of those accounts, the commission reported that 48 of them were billed correctly based on account review, follow-up meter readings and further investigation. One account was read incorrectly and is being corrected.

In letters to Berliner dated March 18 and March 20 reporting the agency’s findings, WSSC General Manager/CEO Jerry N. Johnson wrote that the vast majority of the higher-than-normal bills is unrelated to any type of billing error.

“The investigation of the accounts revealed that the higher charges were due either to the extended billing periods, possible leaks or increased usage,” he wrote.

Berliner said he appreciated WSSC investigating the complaints, but questions remain.

“I confess that it doesn’t comport with my own common sense — how some of these bills can be that much higher,” he said.

Berliner said that because he is not in the position to challenge the commission’s conclusions, he has asked the county’s Office of Consumer Protection to look into the matter.

“I’ve carried this as far as I can, and am at a juncture,” he said. “I think the Office of Consumer Protection is the appropriate government agency to take over.”

Eric Friedman, director of the Office of Consumer Affairs, confirmed that he has been in contact with Berliner’s office regarding the matter.

“I think it is appropriate that they referred the matter to our office,” he said. “We will pick up the ball and investigate it like any thing else. The secret is one step at a time — gathering information, looking at it, and then contacting WSSC to address concerns and any issues that come up.”

WSSC has maintained that the challenging winter weather caused a delay in meter readings, resulting in billing cycles that could be as much as one month longer than normal, at an increase of as much as 30 percent compared to the same period last winter.

In a news release, WSSC reported that it opted to delay meter readings, rather than estimate bills in an effort to provide customers with a bill that most accurately reflects their usage.

The billing cycle included the holidays and several snow days, which WSSC said could translate to increased consumption.

Jim Neustadt, WSSC director of Communications and Community Relations, said their call center is not getting an inordinate amount of calls regarding high bills.

“The phones are not ringing off the hook, and I don’t know that they ever were,” he said. “We’ve done what we can to get the word out to our customers, though bill inserts, news releases and social media.”

“We appreciate our customers understanding that this is one of the effects of the weather we’ve been having,” he added. “The next bill will be smaller than normal.”

Neustadt said that WSSC has waived fees for late payments and tried to accommodate their customers.

“It’s an unfortunate situation, but hopefully next winter will be normal,” he said.

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