

Report: No definitive cause for higher Montgomery water bills

Analysis faults WSSC technology, dispute resolution procedures

By Ryan Marshall Staff Writer

The Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission uses “antiquated” technology for reading customers’ meters and lacks an independent means to deal with complaints of excessive water bills, according to a report from Montgomery County’s Office of Consumer Protection.

The report released Monday found that further independent review might be necessary to find out more about issues that caused an unprecedented number of complaints to the county about water bills that seemed excessive.

Since April, about 50 residents have complained that they’ve received bills that were much higher than normal, according to the report.

But the report notes that the amount of individual bills can’t be used to determine whether there’s a problem, because billing periods vary and rates sometimes change.

“While there is no ‘one size fits all’ explanation for each consumer’s allegations, there appear to be a limited number of possible explanations,” for why some bills might be higher than others, including a customer using more water, a leak or an improperly read or malfunctioning meter, according to the report.

In some cases, usage could spike by as much as 400 percent or a meter could show a drop in usage, after which readings would return to normal.

According to the report, WSSC uses a variety of internal methods to address billing complaints, including groups to help resolve disputes and waiving fees to have staff check for leaks or test meters to make sure they’re working properly.

“All of the current avenues of redress for consumers with regard to billing disputes are administered within WSSC and without requiring WSSC to report to any independent review body,” the report said.

Although the county councils for Montgomery and Prince George’s counties have some say over rates, they don’t seem to have any jurisdiction when it comes to complaints such as billing disputes, it said.

The report also faulted the commission’s outdated technology as a potential cause of the billing problems.

WSSC maintains about 475,000 residential water meters in Montgomery County, according to the report.

About 161,000 of those are located outside a home, while more than 313,000 are inside a home — of which about 19,000 can only be read by a WSSC employee going into the home.

The commission maintains 386 residential meters that are able to be read electronically using “drive-by” technology.

Comparatively, all of Rockville’s residential meters can be read using that technology, and most of the meters in Howard County can be read electronically through radio interface, which lowers the chance of human error, according to the report.

While it’s not clear that inaccurate readings were behind the complaints, “the lack of more sophisticated ‘drive-by’ electronic meter reading technology as employed by other local water jurisdictions gives the appearance that WSSC’s meter reading infrastructure and capabilities are antiquated by comparison and therefore potentially subject to inaccurate readings,” the report said.