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## Residents won't see refunds for water, sewer bills

Haskel Burns , American Staff Writer 9:07 p.m. CDT October 28, 2016



(Photo: Haskel Burns/Hattiesburg American)

Hattiesburg officials will not be allowed to issue refunds to citizens who paid higher water and sewer rates in anticipation of a new wastewater treatment system for the city.

"It's my understanding that we got an attorney general's opinion," Ward 2 Councilwoman Deborah Delgado said Thursday after a meeting at the C.E. Roy Community Center. "I cannot say for sure, but it's my understanding that based upon that opinion that we got, a decision was made to reduce the rates going forward."

The rates were raised in April, when Hattiesburg City Council members voted 4-1 to increase the rates by about 55 percent in preparation for either a land-application system or mechanical treatment system. After that vote, the rates increased to \$6.27 per 1,000 gallons for 1,000-100,000 gallons used, and \$5.19 per 1,000 gallons for more than 100,000 gallons used. A monthly minimum charge of \$20.84 was in place. Residential water users also were charged for sewer service at a monthly rate of 100 percent of their monthly water charge.

Delgado provided the lone vote against the measure.



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Council lowers water, sewer rates; adopts millage

(<http://www.hattiesburgamerican.com/story/news/local/hattiesburg/2016/09/06/council-lowers-water-sewer-rates-adopts-millage/89914890/>)

Those rates were cut in September by about 20 percent, after council members agreed the city's existing lagoons were mostly meeting permit levels and building a new system might not be necessary. The current water rates, which took effect Sept. 1, are \$4.82 per 1,000 gallons for 1,000-100,000 gallons used, and \$4 per 1,000 gallons for more than 100,000 gallons used. A monthly minimum charge of \$16 has been established.

Also effective Sept. 1, all residential water users — including motels, apartments and house trailers — are charged for sewer service at a monthly rate of 100 percent of their monthly water charge, with a minimum charge of \$16.

Residents should see the decreased rates on the current billing cycle.

"It's very unfortunate (the rates were raised), and I hate that it happened in the first place," Delgado said. "But moving forward, I think it's in the best interest of the city to have those rates reduced now, and for us to continue to maintain our lagoons in optimum operating capacity."

Water and Sewer Department Director Chad Frierson said officials will use the remaining approximate 35 percent increase in rates to continue to make improvements to the city's water and sewer system.

"The city made a \$25 million loan with the bank as one part of making wastewater improvements," he said. "Where we're at right now, there's been a list of projects that's been sent to the city council for them to review, and we're intending that money to be used for water and sewer improvements throughout the city."

That includes making any changes or repairs necessary to keep the lagoons meeting permit levels established by the Mississippi Department of

Environmental Quality and other government agencies.

"We're using it to maintain the lagoons in a good operating condition," Delgado said. "There were certain things that needed to be done out there, and they're being done now, and we're having better numbers at this time."



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In early August, council members voted to go ahead with a \$135 million mechanical treatment plant after tossing aside plans for a land-application system to fix the city's wastewater woes. The city already had faced two sets of \$1,500-per-day fines after missing a court-ordered deadline to have design plans for a new system finalized and submitted to not only the appropriate state and federal agencies for approval, but also to the U.S. District Court that is overseeing a suit brought by Gulf Restoration Network.

At a recent meeting with MDEQ and Gulf Restoration Network, a new timeline was agreed to, on the basis that the city's lagoons have mostly met permit limits for the last 12 months or so. That, in turn, gave city officials a chance to step back and look a little closer at the lagoons as a sole wastewater treatment system.

"We're under a current consent decree that we have to make modifications to our lagoons, and we have made some modifications, and it has brought our lagoons back into compliance with our permit," Frierson said. "So we're asking for consideration for a reprieve on having to build some type of new treatment facility at this time, since we are in substantial compliance with our permit requirements.

"Now that's not to say we won't have to do something in the future ... but it doesn't appear that we're under the same timeline that we were under just four months ago. So we'll have to continue to monitor that situation."

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