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Landlords angry over new water bill story

Ray Martin, Times Staff November 24, 2010

Cambridge landlords didn't mince words Monday night when they had their say on the city's new water billing policy.

"I'm a landlord and this whole idea is bad," said Nuno Santos.

More then 120 irate landlords packed city council chambers to oppose a proposal that would require them to pay water and sewer bills of their delinquent tenants.

"I shouldn't have to pay for something I did not use," said John DaCosta, one of the 23 people who made presentations to council Monday.

Leo Hagedorn said the city did not consult with landlords well enough.

"Why didn't we get this information sooner?" he asked, noting that if landlords are made to pay water bills of delinquent tenants, they would have to take the tenant to small claims court and chances of getting their money back is slim.

Glenn Trachsel noted that while most tenants are good and pay their bills, the new policy would have a "ripple effect across the city".

The policy will dissuade people from becoming landlords and could lead to fewer rental housing units being available, Trachsel said.

"This goes against the laws of the land," he said. "There is nothing fair about this law."

Harry Mazmanian, who first raised the issue with council, continued to oppose the new policy.

"It is illegal for the city to do this," he said. "This is not the right way to go."

Fatima Pereira questioned the legality of the meeting and the reasons for holding it ,given that council already approved the policy change on July12. She also put council on notice that if policy is implemented, a classaction lawsuit would follow.

The call for a lawsuit drew applause and cheers from the crowd.

Several of the delegations suggested that smaller landlords would not be able to afford to pay the water bills left behind by tenants. They don't want the unpaid water bills put on their property taxes, nor do they want it to affect their credit ratings.

Over the course of the meeting several presenters suggested remedies to the problem. Santos and others proposed that the city screen tenants with credit checks prior to providing water and sewer services.

"Billing in advance is the right idea and get a deposit," Santos suggested. "If you do the credit check and say no, you are doing us a favour. If they aren't going o pay for water, they're not going to pay the rent."

Prior to hearing delegations, council heard a presentation by city treasurer Steve Fairweather who outlined why and how the changes in water billing had come about.

Fairweather explained that the city is taking over water billing from Cambridge & North Dumfries Hydro starting this month.

He said the utility has introduced remote meter reading and will no longer provide billing service to the city.

Fairweather told council the new policy would not apply to existing tenants and would be phased in as new tenants move in. After hearing from both tenants and staff, councillors asked staff to come back with two reports.

The first is a legal opinion on the matter and the second is a report on how the City of Waterloo does its billing. The Cambridge policy is modeled on City of Waterloo, and may include problems they have had.

No decision was made at Monday's meeting and the issue will come back to council Dec. 13 when the new city council will deal with it.

In an interview, Mayor Doug Craig said city staff is working on a new option for council to consider.

I've asked staff to come back with a new option. It will be a compromise," he said.

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Council defers water billing

By Ray Martin Times Staff

ambridge council deftly dodged a bullet just weeks before the municipal election by simply agreeing to meet with city landlords to further discuss the development of a new water and sewage billing system.

About a dozen landlords and supporters showed up for Monday's final council meeting – before the election on Oct. 25 – to protest against being held responsible for paying outstanding water bills of truant tenants.

Council has deferred the matter to January, when the new city council can address it. The issue will also be part of the 2011 budget discussions, as more people may need to be hired to administer the billing system.

Despite the deferral, a number

of landlords had their say at council. Landlord Kayla Andrade said the proposed billing system would add to the workload of busy landlords. She said landlords can't cut off water and sewer services to a tenant who falls behind in their payments and it would take months to get their money back through small claims court.

Andrade said tenants may try to have their landlords charged with harassment and there is a chance than a tenant could trash their apartments.

Tenant Ali Scott said if a landlord isn't able to pay their tenant's unpaid water bill it could damage the landlord's credit rating.

"It will create leasing complications," she said.

Mayor Doug Craig told the delegations that, "you've made a number of good points that we'll have to look into."

Council considers landlords in new water bill policy

By Ray MARTIN

A fter getting an earful from upset landlords last week, the City of Cambridge is making some changes to its new water billing policy.

At Monday's meeting, council pushed back the implementation of the new billing program to Jan. 1 in order to provide more time for city staff to educate the public on the changes.

It will also allow landlords time to amend their leases to better protect themselves from having to pay water bills of deadbeat tenants.

City treasurer Steven Fairweather explained that when Cambridge and North Dumfries Hydro handled the city's water billing, they would deal with a delinquent account by shut-



Kiefer

ting off the water and turning the matter over to a collection agency. The bill was written off if not paid.

With the city now preparing to take over administration

of water and sewer bills, Fairweather said that under the Municipal Act the city can make the property owner liable to pay the water bill of a delinquent tenant.

Region of Waterloo is taking over water billing for North Dumfries Township and adopting the same policy

"What we are suggesting is pro-

viding more transitional time to get people used to the change," he said.

Members of council agreed.

"People need time to know this and understand this," said Coun.
Karl Kiefer said.

Councillors Pam Wolf and Gary Price questioned what impact the new billing would have on the equal billing program and were told it is grandfathered to the existing policy.

Coun. Rick Cowsill has asked staff to report back to council after the first year of operation, while Coun. Ben Tucci questioned the breach of privacy that would take place when a tenant didn't pay the water bill.

Fairweather explained that a tenant would be given 15 days to pay off a water bill. After that a notice would be sent to both the tenant and landlord.