

Landlords angry over new water bill story

Ray Martin, Times Staff
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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 than 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 July 12. She also put council on notice that if policy is implemented, a class-action 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 to 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.

Since being notified from the utility, the city has decided to take on the water billing itself. Putting the issue in perspective, Fairweather said of the 38,000 total water bill accounts, roughly 1,800 are tenants and those bills average \$200 per billing period.

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.

