



## Feeling bullied by city water billing

Bill Jackson, Times Staff

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Amy King admits she fell a bit behind on her water bill after Christmas, but made a concerted effort to make regular payments along with her common law spouse.

Her bill at the end of February totalled \$294.41 and included a carryover balance of \$134.15. However, she whittled it down to \$95.59 by May 1, at which time she received a letter indicating her arrears and a notice that a process to disconnect her services would commence if her account wasn't paid by May 8.

"If your account is not paid by the due date shown above, we will begin processing a request to disconnect your water service which also includes additional service fees," reads the letter from the City of Cambridge tax and water division.

At the end of May, King received another bill for \$255.85, including the balance forward of \$95.59 and a \$101.18 charge dubbed adjustments/miscellaneous.

It's that last charge to commence the disconnection process that she disputes and it's the only charge left outstanding on her account. She refuses to pay it.

According to Linda Fegan, the city's director of corporate communications, the initial \$100 disconnection fee charged to the patron is to cover administrative costs such as developing and issuing a registered letter, hand delivering a notice to the patron, delivery of a notice to the landlord and other research and payment review associated with administration.

King said she's never received a registered letter and feels as if she's being bullied.

"Now we've got another disconnection letter saying that if you don't pay that \$100 you're going to get disconnected in a couple days and other charges will be applied," she said.

"So we're being charged for something that never happened and now we're getting disconnected for that."

According to Fegan, "Patrons are welcome to contact the city to make arrangements if there are issues regarding ability to pay (things like payment schedule approaches are reviewed). Should full payment not occur, a collection notice is then issued. Again, patrons can reach out to rectify the matter. If payment still hasn't been received, the City of Cambridge issues a disconnect notice."

King said she's begged and pleaded with the city not to disconnect her services.

"I've called them and I've tried to talk to them nicely and the girl sounds nice, but she's really deep down being rude. I'm like 'You can't come and cut my water off, I have a two year old', and she says, 'Yes, actually ma'am, we really can.'"



**Feeling bullied by city water billing.** Amy King feels as though she's being bullied by the city's water division after being threatened with additional fees to disconnect her services. *Bill Jackson, Times Staff*

King said she isn't trying to tell a sob story, but got emotional when recounting her ordeal.

She rents a semi-detached home on Nora Court along with her spouse and toddler. Her father-in-law lives in the basement and together they struggle to pay the bills each month.

"We ended up having to owe money back to the government at tax time," King said. "We apparently make too much. Together we make a total of \$43,000."

Coun. Rick Cowsill said he's attempting to address King's concerns at city hall.

"Her situation sounds similar to many others in the city," said Cowsill. "I get an awful lot of complaints from other constituents on a variety of scenarios regarding the billing."

After taking over water billing services more than a year ago, customer service staff has been swamped with calls and inquiries. In a report from Jonathon Lautenbach, city director of financial services, earlier this year, customer service lines were receiving three times as many calls as any other city department. In the four-month period between January and April, customer service received 13,050 calls, which translates to 160 calls a day.

Council recently voted to double the size of the caller-swamped customer service department within the city tax and water division.

The cost of a supervisor – an \$83,000 position – will be offset by the interest on overdue accounts.

A motion tabled at council earlier this week by Coun. Ben Tucci, and seconded by Cowsill, attempted to determine how many tenant accounts have gone into collections, how many have received a notice of shut-off and \$100 fee, how many tenant water accounts have been shut off and how many delinquent accounts have subsequently been added to the landlord's tax roll.

If not paid by the tenant, delinquent accounts become the responsibility of the landlords, many of whom are now on a mission to change such policy by lobbying for amendments to the Municipal Act. The motion also sought confirmation as to whether delinquent tenants are responsible for a \$300 fee for removal of meters, however, it was lost in a tie vote.

Cowsill said there just isn't the consensus around the table to take a look at water billing policies that won't be up for review for another two years.

"I think we could be doing far better with a different system," he said.

*with files from Ray Martin*

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