

Cambridge gives condo owners big water bill break, but not landlords

By Kevin Swayze, Record staff

January 10, 2012

CAMBRIDGE — Condominium and non-profit housing projects won a huge break on their water-sewer bills Monday, but city council refused to give residential landlords relief they're demanding.

The problem was new city connection fees for water meters serving private fire hydrants inside 30 townhouse complexes. Fees approved in 2009 hiked the monthly fixed costs fourfold in some cases. The money was collected to set aside for replacement of the expensive units when they fail.

Monday, council rolled the "fire line meter" fees back to 2009 levels, plus 20 per cent to match increases in other fees in the last three years.

Council wouldn't, however, budge on complaints from residential landlords who don't want to be stuck with water-sewer bills from deadbeat tenants.

"You are changing the rules in the middle of the game," said landlord Kayla Andrade.

"If you are going to help the fire line people the same thing should happen for us to."

She wants council to stop tacking overdue water-sewer bills — and all the associated late fees — onto the landlords tax bills.

Coun. Ben Tucci said if condo owners get a break, it's only fair council bend the rules for landlords. It's a precedent that sets council up for a legal challenge. He wanted to get a legal opinion from the city's lawyer in a closed session, but was denied.

Tucci tried to reopen debate on water-sewer billing rules, but not enough councillors voted with him.

In December, council raised the 2012 water and sewer rate by 9.88 per cent. That hiked the monthly bill for the average home to \$75 as of Jan. 1. It was \$68 in 2010.

Waiving the fire-flow meter fees chops \$91,000 from the city water budget. To make up the loss, all water customers must pay another 16 cents a month to the average bill.

The cost to all water users of absorbing unpaid tenant water bills wasn't calculated.

There are 3,000 apartments in Cambridge where the city bills tenants. As of last week, 1,718 were 60 days overdue, owing \$503,000, city staff said. If not eventually paid by tenants or landlords, the bills are tacked on property tax bills.

City council took over water and sewer billing from Cambridge-North Dumfries Hydro 14 months ago, after Hydro wanted to get out of running the service.

Cambridge tenants get break on water deposit, landlords still angry

By Kevin Swayze, Record staff

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CAMBRIDGE — Tenants now face a \$230 deposit when they rent an apartment, down from \$400 that was instituted Jan. 1.

City council made no change Monday in the 8.9 per cent water rate hike also approved for 2011.

Nor did city council backtrack on a new \$4 monthly tenant surcharge or tacking any unpaid tenant water bills onto the landlord's tax bill.

Coun. Ben Tucci wants to pry open the rest of the new water-sewer billing rules at the next council meeting Feb. 14. To reopen the issue, he needs two-thirds of council to vote with him. Coun. Nicholas Ermeta also wants to reopen the issue.

Monday, two-thirds council voted to just talk about the deposit amount, but that didn't stop angry landlords from denouncing all the new rules. They want the city to run billing like hydro used to, when people who used the water were solely responsible for their bills.

"My family is at stake here by making me responsible for someone else's bills," said Cambridge landlord Kayla Andrade.

Cambridge took over water and sewer billing Oct. 1 after Cambridge North Dumfries Hydro said it no longer wanted to offer the service to the city. To reduce costs to all water users, city council in July 2010 voted to add unpaid tenant water bills onto the landlord's tax bills, as allowed by Ontario law.

What Cambridge is doing to landlords has been struck down by the courts in Bracebridge and Penetanguishine, said Gord Wellsbury, a landlord advocate.

Landlord Harry Mazmanian asked council if the new deposits only apply to residential tenants, or industrial and commercial tenants, as well. Mayor Doug Craig told Mazmanian to call the city clerk's office Tuesday for the answers.

Tenant advocates said \$400 was too high a deposit for low-income families trying to improve their lives.

"It may well make moving to a better situation impossible," said Gay Slinger, a lawyer who helps low-income tenants.

Waterloo waives the deposit if tenants sign up for automatic payments, she said. Kitchener only charges a \$50 deposit — and doesn't tack unpaid bills onto landlord tax bills, she said.

The city rules "set up tenants for failure" because bills are done every two months, said landlord Terrell Tanner. If a bill isn't paid, then it's four months before a notice to shut off is issued — too late to try to solve a growing problem.

Instead, he suggested setting up an equal billing plan right away, not in a year or more.

Craig said city staff plan to return with a one-year review of the water-sewer billing issue and to look at solutions such as equal billing plans and automatic payments.

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