

****ATTENTION****

The City Council meeting will be held in a hybrid format that may include both in-person AND virtual attendance via Zoom. Unless they have cause to appear virtually, Councilmembers will attend the meeting in person in Council Chambers, second floor of City Hall, 220 N. 27th Street. In order to honor the Right of Participation and the Right to Know in Article II, Sections 8 and 9, of the Montana Constitution, the City of Billings and City Council are making every effort to meet the requirements of the open meeting laws.

Citizens are invited to:

- . Review the Agenda Packet on the City's website at: www.billingsmt.gov and click on "Your Government," "City Council," and "Agendas & Minutes".
- . View the meeting:
 - . On Community 7 TV - Channel 7 or Channel 507 -- Spectrum Cable. *(On evenings when there is a conflict with School District No. 2 Board meetings, the City Council meeting will be broadcast on Channel 8 - Spectrum Cable.)* Channel 7 or Channel 978 - TDS Fiber.
 - . Online at www.comm7tv.com and click on the "Watch Live" icon. Community 7 also has links to their Facebook page and YouTube channel.
 - . On the City's website at www.billingsmt.gov and click on "Watch Meetings Online" on the homepage.
 - . In-Person.

Citizens may submit public comment via the following methods:

- . Mail: City Clerk, P.O. Box 1178, Billings, MT 59103
- . Email: Council@billingsmt.gov.
 - . Emails received after 3:00 PM on the day of the meeting, may be posted on the Council's webpage the following day for public viewing.
- . Attend the meeting in person

Please contact Denise Bohlman, City Clerk, at bohlmand@billingsmt.gov, or at 406.657.8210, with any questions.



VISION STATEMENT:
"The Magic City: A diverse,
welcoming community
where people prosper and
business succeeds."

SPECIAL WORK SESSION AGENDA

COUNCIL CHAMBERS

SEPTEMBER 30, 2024

5:30 P.M.

CALL TO ORDER: Mayor Cole

PUBLIC COMMENT ON ALL ITEMS. This is the time to comment on any matter (Agenda or Non-Agenda) falling within the scope of the Billings City Council. There will also be time in conjunction with each agenda item for public comment relating to that item. You may only speak once for each item during the meeting.

Please note, the City Council cannot take action on any item of significant interest to the public that does not appear on the agenda. Comments are limited to three (3) minutes during each public comment period or as set by the Mayor. **Speaker sign-in required.** Please sign the roster at the cart located at the back of the Council chambers or at the podium.

1. Utility Billing Discussion.

-Public Comment

HIGHLIGHT UPCOMING AGENDA ITEMS OF COUNCIL INTEREST:

COUNCIL DISCUSSION:

PUBLIC COMMENT on "NON-AGENDA ITEMS". **Speaker Sign-in required.** *(Restricted to ONLY items not on this printed agenda. Comments are limited to 3 minutes or as set by the Mayor. Please sign the roster at the cart located at the back of the Council chambers or at the podium.)*

ADJOURN:

Note:

- This meeting is an "informal" meeting of the City Council. The content of the Agenda is subject to change at the meeting.
- In the event there is a Closed Executive Session, the sole purpose is to discuss litigation strategy. The other parties to the case(s) discussed are not public bodies or associations as described in Section 2-3-203(1) and (2), MCA. The meeting is closed, as allowed by Section 2-3-203(4) (a), MCA, "to discuss a strategy to be followed with respect to litigation when an open meeting would have a detrimental effect on the litigating position" of the City of Billings.

City Council Work Session

Date: 09/30/2024
Title: Utility Billing
Presented by: Chris Kukulski, City Administrator
Department: City Hall Administration
Presentation: Yes
Legal Review: Not Applicable
Project Number: N/A

RECOMMENDATION

No action is requested. The conversation is intended to answer questions about utility bills and meters.

BACKGROUND (Consistency with Adopted Plans and Policies, if applicable)

In June 2024, the City transitioned to a new utility billing software. Following the conversion, staff encountered multiple issues that led to delays in issuing bills. As a result, most customers received 60-day bills, while approximately 1,000 customers received 90-day bills. Since the distribution of the 60-day bills, a few thousand customers have reached out via phone, email, and social media with concerns about high bills, particularly about higher than expected water usage.

As your city administrator, it is my responsibility to ensure that services to our citizens are both effective and efficient. Unfortunately, we did not meet this commitment in this instance. In hindsight, after missing the window to implement the software conversion in the spring, I should have delayed it until the fall. We are fully committed to restoring the trust of the city council and our residents. With the integrity, dedication, and service commitment of our staff, I am confident we will resolve this issue and move forward stronger.

Staff will provide a brief history of the utility billing conversion, the challenges encountered, and the steps being taken to verify the accuracy of bills. Staff will also address the most common questions and concerns that we have heard from the community. Additionally, staff will discuss options for a third-party analysis/audit to reassure customers of the accuracy of the billing and meter reading systems. There will be time dedicated to answering questions from the City Council and hearing public comments.

For customers who grant permission, staff will review live billing and meter data to present real-life examples. Forms will also be available for those who would like to request follow-up assistance from the Public Works team.

The following is a template response we began to use this week as we became overwhelmed with emails. It includes hyperlinks to help customers assess their utility bills.

Good Morning,

We have received an extremely high number of inquiries about the 60-day utility bills. Your inquiry is important to us and instead of making you wait for an extensive time for a response, we want to offer a few tools that may help you to find the answer you are seeking.

General Information:

Generally, this is a 60-day bill covering most of July and August so it should be roughly double what your typical summer usage would be instead of your last statement because that would not have been for summer usage. In addition though, annual solid waste, water and sewer rate increases averaged 7.8% this year. And, the storm fee was moved from taxes to the utility bill so that makes the average percentage increase approximately 15.5%. The storm fee will be removed from your taxes so it is not a true increase. We have seen a 29% increase in consumption across the city this summer due to the high temperatures so we are seeing that most people are using more water, similar to usage in the summer of 2021.

It is important to also know that we have reviewed thousands of bills and have not found errors in the bills. The bills were delayed due to our extensive effort to ensure that the bills were accurate. So, while it is not impossible that the bill you have has an error, it is highly improbable.

Frequently asked questions that address these bills: <https://billingsmtpublicworks.gov/248/Payments-Utility-Account-Services>

Access information online:

Also, you can find a lot of information in the online portal. You can see the breakdown of the bill and usage and you can manage your account including autopay, leak notification, and other preferences. We created a tutorial to help with the log in:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HzRj7TZkZd4>

The online bill pay system can be accessed at:

<https://accountadmin.billingsmtpublicworks.gov/>

The following link will give you both old and new account numbers, so if you need your new account number, please use this link:

[Water Billing History Query \(billingsmt.gov\)](#)

Instruction to review bill:

We have also created a video that walks through the information on your bill and how you can do a quick check of this current bill as it relates to previous usage at your address.

<https://youtu.be/KBYRaVCDb0U>

Information on previous years usage can oftentimes be found in the portal but we've also developed a tool that you can use to get your last few years' usage. The link is at [Water Billing History Query \(billingsmt.gov\)](#) and you will need to know either your old account number or new account number.

The vast majority of bills are for 60 days but there are a few 90-day bills. This video will show where to look for the billing period -- *please be aware that the graph does not reflect the billing period, it simply shows the amount as of the bill date.*

Further information:

If this information does not give you the answer you are looking for, please reply to this email and an account representative will review it and get back to you. Please allow a few weeks due to the large number of inquiries.

ALTERNATIVES

NA

FISCAL EFFECTS

There is no fiscal impact from having the discussion.
