

City Council**Notice of Motion**

MM26.6	ACTION			Ward: All
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Better Billing: Increasing uptake for monthly water billing and COVID relief for seniors and small businesses - by Councillor Brad Bradford, seconded by Councillor Paul Ainslie

** Notice of this Motion has been given.*

** This Motion is subject to referral to the Executive Committee. A two-thirds vote is required to waive referral.*

Recommendations

Councillor Brad Bradford, seconded by Councillor Paul Ainslie, recommends that:

1. City Council request the Director, Revenue Services, in consultation with the General Manager, Toronto Water, to provide an update through the 2021 budget process on the uptake of monthly water billing, including:
 - a. a review of program uptake for monthly utility billing, including opportunities to increase uptake of online billing for Toronto Water customers;
 - b. estimated cost of providing the option for monthly residential water billing to avoid unexpected, large increases in billing amounts; and
 - c. the status of moving water billing to an entirely online system.
2. City Council request the Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer, in consultation with the General Manager, Toronto Water and other relevant divisions, to explore opportunities in the 2021 Budget to provide additional billing relief to low income seniors and businesses impacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic in instances where they have experienced higher than usual water bills but do not meet the thresholds or criteria to qualify for relief, such as a three-fold increase in their typical bill.

Summary

Using a four-month billing cycle, the City currently bills more than half a million water accounts three times a year. There is an incredible amount of procedure involved in this system, including a significant postage cost to the City of Toronto. In contrast to typical monthly utility bills, receiving a bill in four-month increments is complex and unintuitive for a lot of residents. Of particular concern in this system are bills that often arrive too late after a costly leak begins, placing a significant financial burden on unknowing households and small businesses. The

challenges with water billing cycles has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has emphasized the existing need for modernization.

This Motion seeks Council's support on two key actions: reviewing Toronto Water's current monthly billing option to find opportunities for increased monthly billing uptake, and exploring options to provide financial relief to customers who have seen significant increases in their bills. There are a number of existing thresholds to qualify for a water bill refund, but these typically only apply to the most extreme scenarios, such as a three-fold increase in billing amount, or uncontrollable circumstances, such as theft or natural disasters. Additionally, while the Toronto Water rate is set to correct for seasonal variations in water usage, this only applies to the residential tax class, with no support for small businesses.

While these measures address severe incidents, they do not offer relief to the many residents and small businesses who have faced the downsides of the four-month billing system or to those facing unexpected increases during already difficult financial circumstances created by the Pandemic. Given the prevalence of this billing system in the lives of many residents, the City should explore every opportunity to support residents and businesses impacted by these circumstances.

Background Information (City Council)

Member Motion MM26.6