Contact: Bob Pingley, Operations Manager
City of Elkins
Phone: 304-635-7021
bpingley@cityofelkinswv.com

Press Release

Elkins Water Rates to Rise in Bills Due December 19

The increase pays for the $37 million Water System Improvement Project.

Elkins W. Va., September 20, 2017: City of Elkins water customers will see sizable rate increases in their bills due December 19. Here's why: The city is commencing debt service on the $37 million package of loans and bonds that funded the new water-treatment plant, pumping station, reservoir, and other critical improvements to the Elkins water system. The new water-treatment plant is anticipated to go into service in December.

The New Rates

This rate increase is the second of two approved by Elkins Common Council in 2015. The first increase, which went into effect in 2015, covered the increased cost of ongoing operations. The increase that will be seen on bills due December 19 covers the cost of the Elkins Water System Improvement Project and was a loan condition imposed by the project's funders, according to Bob Pingley, the operations manager for the City of Elkins.

"Just like individuals applying for mortgages have to prove they have the income to make repayment, we had to commit to raising our water rates enough to cover our monthly payments before we could access project funds," Pingley says, going on to explain that the sole purpose of this increase is to cover the almost $116,000 monthly payments that the city will have to make until 2055. West Virginia law requires that municipal water utilities be run like independent businesses, with no income other than customer payments.

Under the new rates, the cost for customers' first 2,000 gallons will rise from $10 to $15.25 per 1,000 gallons, a 52.5 percent increase, and the cost for customers' next 3,000 gallons will rise from $5.49 to $8.50 per 1,000 gallons, a 54.83 percent increase. The full text of the water-rate ordinance, including other rate changes, may be reviewed online here. *[Full link at end of text.]*

Just in Time

The city's new water plant marks a big step forward from the old plant, which has been in service since 1921. "The people who built our old plant almost a century ago did great work," says Pingley. "But everything has a lifespan, and the old plant has gotten to a point where we can't prudently rely on it much longer."

One of the most crucial capabilities of the new water-treatment plant is that it is equipped with backup generators, which the old plant has always lacked because of the nonstandard design of its 1920s-era electrical system. Lack of backup power isn't a problem when power outages are brief, but there have been times in the city's recent history when longer power outages have come close to draining city reservoirs, such as during Hurricane Sandy.

"During the Hurricane Sandy power outage, we got to within about 5 hours of running our reservoir dry," says Pingley, who points out that—although Elkins can supply backup water to neighboring utilities if their plants break down—no neighboring utility can generate enough water to supply both its own customers and Elkins. "Until the new plant comes on line, if a power outage lasts long enough, Elkins could simply run out of water."

The effects of losing city water range from inconvenient to grim to terrifying. Conditions in homes would quickly become unsanitary; schools and businesses would close; hospitals and other care facilities would have to limit services and evacuate patients; and dry hydrants and sprinkler systems would make it difficult or impossible to fight fires.

"Everyone at the City of Elkins is going to heave a huge sigh of relief once we shift to the new plant," says Pingley.

A New Plant for a New Century

The new plant can produce 4,000 gallons of clean drinking water per minute, compared to the old plant's 3,800. The new plant also provides a positive barrier against waterborne viruses by using filtration membranes, which are replaceable and so can be upgraded as filtration technology advances. A new 3-million-gallon, pre-stressed-concrete reservoir tank, which replaces the welded-steel Crystal Springs and McQuain Road tanks, has also been constructed next to the new plant atop Reservoir Hill in the city's Wees District.

Because of the hilltop location of both the new plant and the new reservoir, the city's water distribution system will be entirely gravity-fed for the first time, which Pingley says offers additional customer benefits.

"A gravity-fed distribution system eliminates fluctuations in water pressure, makes the system less vulnerable to shocks from power surges and restarting the pump after power outages, and simplifies flushing lines," says Pingley. "That should translate to fewer water-main breaks and other service disruptions, less sediment at the tap, and decreased stress on appliances and fixtures."

More Than Just a New Water Plant

Pingley emphasizes that this isn't a "water-plant project," it's a "water-system improvement project." In other words, that $37 million price tag is buying Elkins a lot more than a twenty-first-century, state-of-the-art water plant and a new, highly durable reservoir tank. Other water-system improvements include the installation of 43,540 feet of new water lines; the removal of many old, deteriorated sections of pipe; 41 new fire hydrants; and a new pumping station with backup generators and new intakes and raw-water pumps.

"I know no one is happy about this big jump in water rates, but I want everyone to understand how much value we are getting for the money," says Pingley, who explains that the city's new water rates are similar to those charged by other West Virginia cities that have also recently completed large water infrastructure projects. "After this project, Elkins will have a much more robust, redundant, reliable water system, which I know everyone wants—not just for ourselves, today, but also for the future generations who will live and work in Elkins. These new rates are simply what it costs to achieve that."

##

Link to rate ordinance:

http://cityofelkinswv.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/197-City-of-Elkins-Water-Ordinance_signed.pdf