

Worksession Agenda Summary

February 8, 2022

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Title:

Residential Water Meter Project and Customer Service Update

Background:

With aging water meters, extended mechanical wear, and batteries exceeding their operable life, the Water & Sewer Department budgeted to replace and update its meters to industry standard equipment. The multi-year meter replacement project will replace aging and failing meter infrastructure and improve service to our customers. The replacement meters meet all industry standards, and when installed provide the city with accurate reads and water use data that can catch water leaks. The new meters have the ability to share use data with the city's WaterSmart customer portal and water management tools, enabling each customer to view their current use and history. New water meters will help the customer or city identify water leaks before they become costly, and they will empower customers to actively manage their water use. The replacement meters are the industry standard, capable of storing and transmitting more water use data, and the city's installation vendor will be working to install another 6,250 plus water meters in 2022. The '22 work plan has installations starting in February, and will again address areas where there is a high incidence of meter communication failure from the old meters. Meter project information and an interactive map are available at: <https://greeleygov.com/services/ws/water-budget/metering>

Because the meter project provides a great opportunity for water efficiency, the city's project received a Bureau of Reclamation (BoR) WaterSMART grant in 2020 for ~\$1.45 Million dollars to supplement the city budget for the first 3 years of the project. The first phase of the project kicked off in 2021, but was immediately slowed by meter availability supply chain issues and a labor shortage impacting the installation contractor, UMS. Once the meter inventory was received, the majority of phase one installations were done between June and November 2021. In this first phase, the city and its vendor, UMS, ran into some quality control challenges that we have since established procedures to prevent. The city has bolstered the utility billing customer service staffing and response, with back up support and escalation protocols that provide W&S Dept. resources to augment utility billing needs. The city has also enhanced our customer communications and pre-installation property owner notices.

In addition to the 6,250 replacements per year, the city is tackling the growing list of those meters that have failed in use. This is an equally valuable scope of work to prevent further customer service and billing issues.

As this important infrastructure project moves forward, the city wants to ensure we've addressed the challenges experienced in 2021. A brief summary of the 2021 phase 1 project is below for your edification.

2021 Challenges and Response:

1. Installation labor was difficult to obtain, untrained and needed more vendor oversight and quality control from their organization.
2. Some meter pits are plumbed in unique and complicated ways that required escalation of questions on proper installation.
3. Some meter pits are covered by shrubs, mulch, raised flower beds, etc., and could not be located by the meter replacement technicians, despite the city's provision of notes and maps.
4. The "no read" list of residential water meters that are not communicating grew faster than the city's meter shop could keep up. These "no read" meters are on routes all across the city, and only some can be addressed by the UMS vendor.
5. City has tried to hire seasonal labor, and has some meter shop working weekend to address the growing no read meter list. This work is important to customer service and accurate billing.
6. Water & Sewer Dept. leadership, the project manager and city meter shop did not plan for the level of significant back-up support and quality control that was needed to catch vendor installation mistakes or other customer concerns.
7. The delay in meters caused the installation timeline to overlap with peak summer irrigation season, a time when more customers exceed their water budget, experience leaks, or simply use more than expected and the customer needs engaged customer support from the city on these types of use and billing issues.
8. From June through September of 2021, there were 17 customers, or approximately 0.4% of the new meter installations that had an installation problem due to unorthodox plumbing in the meter pit and inexperienced installation technicians. That issue caused very large water bills for those 17 customers.
9. Word of the large water bills being correlated to improper installation spread on social media with messages that "if you had a large water bill, it was likely the new meter." Due to the irrigation season, there were a significant number of customers with large bills and concerns about the cause.
10. The significant number of concerned customers, not all from Greeley, generated high customer service phone call, email and walk requests for customer service. The calls overwhelmed the city's Utility Billing staff and their voice mail system, exacerbating the customer concerns.
11. New meter installations were paused in early October of '21 to ensure meter installation training by the vendor, and to address quality control strategies.
12. W&S Dept. staff in coordination with the Finance Dept. and its utility billing staff worked out customer service back up support plans to augment utility billing as needed and escalate complicated water use calls to the W&S Dept. conservation staff trained in this type of data review. with IT to correct some issues with the voice message system,

13. The Water and Sewer Department, in coordination with Finance, who oversees the city's utility billing function, and Communications and Engagement staff have enhanced communications and the customer service response.
14. The Water and Sewer staff hosted a Town Hall Webinar on November 18, 2021 to further engage with customers and directly responds to concerns. Newsletter and web resources, social media resources, Tribune advertisement and a press release were communicated on several platforms in both English and Spanish.
15. Staff have planned the phase 2, meter replacement project to be outside of the irrigation season and have obtained the meter stock necessary to execute the next phase of the project.

The phase 1 project challenges highlighted areas where our customer service needed additional resources, technology, and back-up protocols. Together with Finance and Utility Billing, we have implemented standard operating procedures (SOPs) for coordination of new customer engagement, water budget updates, meter replacement customer service, and cross departmental call log and follow up tracking to better measure our efforts to deliver a high level of customer support and service.

Throughout this meter infrastructure replacement project, the city remains focused on delivering tools that enhance the customer experience, providing consistent customer communication about the project, and ensuring the subsequent phases of meter installation occur smoothly. The next phase of meter replacement installations will kick off in February of 2022 and run through May or June. The project will have experienced labor on the installations and meter shop support. Subsequent phases of the project will require that the meter replacement installation work takes place outside the prime irrigation season as to limit future issues and better manage the customer call volume year round. Water & Sewer's conservation staff will remain committed to augmenting utility billing staff and acting in an escalation roll for calls that have complex issues requiring data analysis.

Strategic Work Program Item or Applicable Council Priority and Goal:

Infrastructure & Growth: Establish the capital and human infrastructure to support and maintain a safe, competitive, appealing and successful community.

Attachments:

Presentation Slides