

**City of St. Helens**  
**Utility Billing Administrative Rules**  
**Approved by City Council as of February 1, 2019**

**1. NEW ACCOUNTS AND DEPOSITS**

To begin service a Utility Account Application must be filled out and turned into the Utility Billing office. The application is available at the office and online. Water service will not be turned on until an application is reviewed and approved by the Utility Billing staff. A renter is required to receive a signature from the property owner/property manager approving the renter to begin service. With the owner's signature, the owner is acknowledging responsibility for any unpaid bill that is remaining on the account when service ends.

Water Service can be turned on/off by Public Works employees from Monday through Friday ~~830-9~~ 8:30-9 AM – 4 PM for no charge. Outside of the hours listed before, water service can be turned on/off by request for a flat fee of \$100. The \$100 will be placed as a charge on the account.

When a customer is new, any old account at the service address must be paid in full before a new account is started and water service is turned on. In the case of renters, an old account bill responsibility will fall to the homeowner to be paid before a new renter's service will be turned on. It is the owner/renter's responsibility to notify the utility billing department when a renter is moving out so that a final bill can be processed.

When any account is assessed a late fee three times or more within a calendar year, a deposit in the amount of equal to one month of utility service will be required to be paid to the City to continue service. This fee and the amount applied is at the discretion of the Finance Director of the City of St. Helens.

**2. UTILITY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM**

The Utility Assistance Program, formally known as the Senior Citizen Discount, was permanently discontinued in December 2013. Customers who previously qualified and were receiving assistance prior to December 2013 will continue to receive a fixed discount of \$10 per month as long as they continue to meet the following criteria each year:

1. Account holder is age 65 or Older
2. Currently reside in the residence that receives the Utility Assistance Program
3. Residence is within City limits
4. Provides proof of residency at property (i.e. Electric bill, tax form, etc.) once per year

Failure to show proof of this criteria by June 30 each year will result in a loss of the Utility Assistance Program without the option of reapplying. Mailing to residents who receive this discount will begin in March and include instructions on how to continue with the discount program.

**3. MONTHLY BILLING**

Billings are mailed out through a separate business. Monthly billings are due on the 10<sup>th</sup> of every month. Payments can be made by cash, check, money order, credit/debit card, online and by our automated phone payment system. Payments over the phone are not allowed to be taken by staff, but can be forwarded to our automated phone payment system. Payments made online are posted to our accounting system daily.

**4. BILLING ADJUSTMENTS**

Misread Meters

If a meter is misread, the City will refund any/all late fees and re-read the meter and adjust bill accordingly for that period.

Leak Adjustments

- a) The water leak adjustment form is available on the City's website and at the Utility Billing counter. This form must be completed within 45 days of the billing date in question.
- b) The water leak adjustment form must be accompanied by a 3<sup>rd</sup> party statement (plumbing service, etc.) that says a leak was present and repaired and/or receipts for leak repair materials if completed by the homeowner.
- c) If the water leak adjustment is not approved, the customer will receive notification from the City with a specific reason why. A customer can request an appeal process with the Finance Director of the City.  
  
If the water leak is approved, the City will use the customer's average seasonal usage for the previous 3 years as a base for consumption. If the customer does not have enough history to complete this, the City will use the previous one to three consecutive months of consumption to calculate the leak and volume adjustment amount. Once approved, the leak adjustment amount will be credited back to the customer's account and the customer will be notified by the City.
- d) The City will not consider leak adjustment requests from customers who have already received a leak adjustment in the past 12 months unless there are extenuating circumstances.
- e) The minimum credit issued will be \$15.00.

## 5. DELINQUENT ACCOUNTS

### Late Fee Assessment

A \$25 late fee is assessed on the 21<sup>st</sup> of every month. Customers who carryover a balance of equal or less than \$25.00 will not be charged a late fee or shut off during the billing process.

### Shut-Off Procedure

General Process for Shut-off account status:

- 1) Official due date of billing > 10<sup>th</sup> of every month (or next available business day)
- 2) Late Fee Assessed > 21<sup>st</sup> of every month (or next available business day)
- 3) Shut-Off Process > Begins on the 20<sup>th</sup> of every month

On the actual shut-off day, if an account is still in shut-off status, an additional \$75 Reconnection Fee is placed onto the account and the account must be paid in full by cash, debit, or credit card. Payments via check at this time will not be accepted. Payments made online during shut-off may be required to wait until the next business day and posting of the payment is made by Utility Billing staff before service is restored.

Utility Workers are not allowed to accept any form of payment. Accounts must be made to bring the account below a \$25 carryover threshold before the meter and water service is turned back on. Water shut-off and reconnection service will not be available during Holidays and weekends. After normal business hours request to turn on/off water service can be done with a fee of \$150. Normal business days/hours are Monday through Friday ~~8:30:00~~ AM till 4:00 PM.

## 6. PAYMENT PLANS

With monthly billing practices and regular shutoffs scheduled typically once per month or bi-monthly, the city does not regularly allow payment plan arrangements for customers that are one or two months behind on payments. Non-payment in this scenario would result in late fee assessment and eventual shut-off procedure if the account balance is not brought below a \$25 carryover threshold as mentioned in Admin Rule #5.

In a scenario in which a customer is with a large balance of three or more months of utility charges, the supervisor of the Utility Billing Department or City Administrator has the ability to enter into a payment plan agreement not to exceed six (6) months to bring the account current. Failure to comply for any reason with the agreed payment plan will result in the account being added to the next available shut-off procedure timeline and/or immediate shut-off of services if approved by the supervisor and City Administrator.

## 7. FINAL BILLING

The City requires that all homeowners and/or tenants give the City notice of the intent to vacate a property to prepare a final bill and shut-off the account. A forwarding address is required for the final bill to be mailed. Final billings, if not paid by the scheduled due date, will be immediately sent to a collection agency for processing or water will be shut off to the property until paid.

**8. TEMPORARY SERVICES FOR NEW CONSTRUCTION**

The City allows temporary service during construction of a new structure needing water, sewer and storm drainage. The contractor will be required to complete an application just like a new customer. All of the Administration Rules contained herein remain in effect. A \$25.00 non-refundable deposit is required.

**9. NSF PAYMENTS**

Accounts will only be allowed two NSF (non-sufficient funds) before a note is placed on the account to no longer accept checks as payment. If the City receives an NSF notice for a utility payment, the payment is immediately reversed and the account is charged a \$25.00 processing fee. A notice will go out to the owner/renter and payment must be made within three business days of notification or water service will be shut off until full payment is received.

**10. TAMPERING WITH METERS & BLOCKING METER ACCESS**

It is illegal to tamper with City meters. This includes turning on/off your meter. City staff should be the only people addressing meters on site. If tampering is found to have happened on a meter, the homeowner is ultimately responsible and will be charged a minimum of \$50.00 up to and possibly including the cost of the meter and labor time.

If a customer is currently on the City's shut-off list and it is found that the water meter was turned on illegally after City staff turned the service off for non-payment, the account will be charged a minimum of \$100 up to and possibly including the cost of the meter plus labor time if it needs to be replaced. The \$100 fee will be placed on the account and must be paid immediately before service will be properly restored.

If a customer's meter is currently on "lock" status by City staff and it is found that the meter and/or shut-off attachment has been tampered in any way to turn water service on illegally, the account will be charged a minimum of \$200 up to and including the cost of replacing the meter, labor time and potentially including a ticket from the Police Department for tampering which will include a separate fee amount and an appearance day in Municipal Court.

If an account is in shut-off status and the meter is blocked, a fee up to \$75 will be assessed including potential towing/moving costs if necessary that will be the responsibility of the registered owner of the property moved.

**11. COVID-RELATED EXTENSIONS OF NON-PAYMENT**

Through the COVID-19 Pandemic, the City has declared a State of Emergency. This included a moratorium on utility service late fees and shut-off practices. City Council agrees on taking steps to move back to standard practices but recognizes some account balances may need time allowances to make extra payments and seek assistance for outside agencies to get their balance in good standing. The City has identified that January 20<sup>th</sup> 2022 will be the date that account balances need to be brought back to a current status amount to avoid being shut off.

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