

MARBLEHEAD WATER AND SEWER COMMISSION



THE FLOW N' GO

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SEWER DEDUCT INSPECTION PROCEDURES DURING COVID-19

Like everything else in the universe, the COVID-19 Pandemic has forced several changes to the way the Water and Sewer Commission conducts its business. One aspect that has been affected is the process for sewer deduct inspections.

For everyone's protection, water and sewer department personnel will not enter any building to perform work unless it is an emergency. Sewer deduct inspections are not considered an emergency.

The water department is maintaining a list of customers who have requested a sewer deduct inspection. They will be contacted to set up an appointment when in-person inspections resume.

In the meantime, a temporary process has been established to allow customers to receive their sewer deduct credit.

The sewer deduct meter must be installed by a licensed plumber who has obtained the required permit from the plumbing inspector's office. Once the plumbing inspector has inspected and tagged the installation, the homeowner must submit to the Commission pictures of the following:

- Deduct meter reading and serial number;
- White plumbing inspector's tag showing date of inspection;
- Main meter reading;
- The entire deduct assembly—meters, valves and piping;
- The back-flow preventer.

Once the pictures have been evaluated and are found to be in compliance, a letter of temporary approval will be sent to the customer along with an invoice for the \$100 inspection fee. The inspection fee and any

outstanding account balance must be paid in full before activation of the deduct meter in the billing system. The starting read of the meter will be that indicated in the temporary approval letter and the credit will appear on the next quarterly invoice.

When having the meter installed, either the plumber or homeowner will need to connect the wire that is included in the deduct meter kit to the Iperl meter and pull the wire to the outside of the residence to within a few inches from the existing main meter touch pad. Once the wire is installed, the homeowner will need to call the water department to schedule a time for a technician to install and activate the remote reader and touch pads from the outside.

When our technicians are allowed to enter homes again, an appointment to do an in-person inspection will be scheduled. If the wires had not been previously installed, it will be done at that time. (If the wires need to pass through a finished wall or foam insulation, the homeowner will need to have an electrician install the wires.)

If the meter assembly does not pass the on-site inspection, all past credit received will be removed from the account and the sewer deduct will be deactivated in the billing system. The reason for the failed inspection must be corrected and the water department must be notified to schedule a re-inspection.

If the deduct meter passes the re-inspection, the meter will be reactivated in the billing system with a starting read taken at the time of the re-inspection. No credit will be received for the period of time before the deduct meter passes the re-inspection.

This process is one change in policy that the Commission has instituted to benefit the homeowner and to protect residents and our emergency response staff during COVID.

Help thy Neighbor

If you have a neighbor or relative who has lost their job or who is struggling during these times of Covid-19, maybe you could help them by paying a portion of their water and sewer bill.

Has your neighbor cut your lawn and wouldn't take any money? This would be a great way to repay them.

Have a relative with a birthday coming up? Need a Christmas gift for that hard-to-buy-for person? What better a present than to help them out with their bill?

Just call the water and sewer office and ask for their account number to include on the check.

CONTACT INFORMATION

781 631-0102
781 631-2694
781 631-2670 (FAX)

**Marblehead.org/
waterandsewer**

Superintendent
Amy McHugh

Office Manager/Editor
Paul Jalbert

Office Location
100 Tower Way
Building #11

Mailing Address
P.O. Box 1108
Marblehead, MA 01945

ON-LINE AUTOMATIC WITHDRAWAL PAYMENTS ARE NOT RECOMMENDED

It's great to see so many of our customers using the on-line payment portal available on the Town's website at www.marblehead.org. It is an easy and convenient way to pay your water and sewer bill.

While this on-line payment service does offer an automatic payment option (something that was often requested by our customers), we do not recommend that it be set up for water and sewer bills. The following is an actual incident that clearly illustrates why automatic payment is not advisable:

Back in 2011 there was a building in town that was only occupied periodically and the toilet was infrequently used. Their water and sewer bill, including administrative fees, was less than \$100 a year.

The toilet was used one Friday and when the owners re-



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turned the following Monday they found that the toilet had been running all weekend. They fixed it, not realizing how much water had been used over those three days.

They were more than shocked when they received that quarter's bill for \$1,053.25. (Keep in mind that they usually pay less than \$100 for an entire year.) And this was at the 2011 rates.

Can you imagine what havoc this would cause if this amount was automatically withdrawn from their account?

If you have an irrigation system, extended watering times or a leak could also cause an unexpected jump in charges.

While automatic payments may be more convenient, it could easily result in an over-drawn checking account and some hefty bank charges.

WATER AND SEWER COMMISSION REVIEWING PAYMENT ALTERNATIVES FOR CUSTOMERS EXPERIENCING FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES DUE TO COVID-19

The article *Help Thy Neighbor* on the front page of this issue of *The Flow N' Go* is about helping a neighbor or relative who may be struggling to pay their water and sewer bills because they have been laid off or lost their job due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. But what if it is you yourself who is experiencing financial difficulties? What if you can't pay your water and sewer bills at this time?

If COVID-19 is causing you financial hardship, please let the Water and Sewer Commission know sooner rather than later. Don't just not pay your water and sewer bill as that could lead to a termination of your water service.

As this newsletter went to print, the Water and Sewer Commission was diligently working on developing a program that will allow customers who have been affected financially by COVID to spread the payment of their water and sewer bills over time. The inability to pay must be documented to be a *direct* result of COVID-19.

It should be emphasized that this would not be a grant or financial assistance program and will not relieve the customer of their responsibility to pay their bill in full. (More on this later.) It would allow the customer to set up a payment schedule and avoid a termination of water service for non-payment.

Preliminary parameters for the program would allow a customer to file a request for a payment agreement with the Water and Sewer Commission. Documentation that would be required are proof of residency, proof of income for all residents 18 years of age and older, evidence that the reason that the customer is unable to pay at this time is directly a result of COVID-19, and an agreement committing the customer to

take water conservation measures.

Each request will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. If the application is approved by the Commission, a payment plan would be set up for that customer to accept and sign. Filing of an application does not guarantee that a payment agreement will be extended.

As mentioned earlier in this article, this would not be a financial assistance program and that the full amount of the bill would need to be paid. The reason that the Water and Sewer Commission cannot simply waive or reduce a customer's bill is because the Commission must pay the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority for every drop of water that is used in Marblehead and also be able to cover the water and sewer budgets that were approved at Town Meeting for department operations, maintenance, and completing on-going water and sewer construction projects. The departments are fully rate-funded and receive no funding from local real estate taxes.

And, any amount not collected from a customer would need to be paid by all ratepayers. This would require an increase in water rates for all customers.

As we had said, let us know sooner rather than later if COVID has affected your ability to pay your water and sewer bill. Don't wait until you have had an outstanding balance exceeding six months before you call us. An approved payment plan will be the only way to avoid service termination.

Details of this program contained in this article are preliminary and are subject to change. The program is expected to be in effect by mid-November.