

City Q&A:

Water and Sewer Service Rates: What's Changing and How That Affects You

Water – we all need it. It's the most important thing we depend on to stay alive. Most of us probably take it for granted, but bringing water in and out of our homes is not easy. Water and sewer services are crucial to us every day—consider life with a toilet that never flushes, a shower that doesn't work, or a kitchen sink that doesn't drain.

How we pay for those water and sewer services is changing a bit, so to give you all the details, here is your guide to water and wastewater in Red Wing.

How are current rates changing? When you pay for your water and sewer services, the dollars go into two buckets: Water Availability and Water Consumption.

(a) Water Availability. This bucket pays for the buildings, equipment, pipes, and people necessary to deliver clean water to you and get your sewage water out. This dollar figure is the same every month and is based on what size water meter you have. On your utility bill, this line item is listed as "WA & SE Availability." This rate is going up for everyone to cover the increased costs of the services. However, in the past, residents in single-family homes were paying more percentage-wise than businesses and multi-family property owners for this availability. A new policy now makes the system fairer because residents, multi-family property owners, and businesses will all be paying a more equal amount proportionally. That means homeowners will pay a smaller increase than larger entities will.

(b) Water Consumption. This bucket pays for the power, chemicals, testing, and maintenance to pump the water, treat it, and deliver it to you, then take the sewage water away and treat it again before it travels into the Mississippi River. This dollar figure is variable and changes each month based on the amount of water you use. If you use a lot of water, your dollar amount in this bucket goes up. If you use less water, the amount goes down. On your utility bill, this is listed as two items: "Water" and "Sewer," and the numbers fluctuate monthly. Rates are changing somewhat for everyone, but not a huge amount—and residents will most likely favor this change. Service rates for drinking water will increase just 1 cent per 100 cubic feet, and sewer services will *decrease* \$1.14 per 100 cubic feet. (On average, a low-water user uses 200 cubic feet of water per month and an average family of four uses 1,000 cubic feet of water per month.) Some people may not see an increase in their Consumption portion of their payment, and some will even see this portion of their payment go down.

How will the new policy make things more fair? For more than 20 years, property owners of single-family homes have paid more percentage-wise for the water availability portion of their bill than some of the larger commercial businesses and owners of multi-family housing units. City Councils years ago created that policy, and since then, the

system has worked in favor of some and not for others. The change now puts everyone on a more level playing field, and everyone is paying a more equal amount comparably.

When will this change start? The change will begin July 1, 2022. You will receive your first bill with the changes around mid-August. The due date will be mid-September.

Who will feel this change the most and least? People who own single-family homes will see the smallest change. Their bills will most likely be similar to their current bill or a few dollars more per month. Those who will see the highest increases are organizations that require more infrastructure to deliver higher volumes of water, such as large businesses, institutional facilities, and owners of big multifamily housing units, because they were previously paying less percentage-wise. Those increases will vary and depend primarily on the amount of water used. Landlords of smaller multifamily housing units will see moderate changes. (For more details on rate changes and specific answers for landlords, visit the “Water and Sewer Rates” page at www.red-wing.org.)

Do we pay more in Red Wing for water and sewer than other cities around us? Red Wing is the middle. We pay less than people in Willmar, Winona, Marshall, and St. Peter, for example, and we pay more than folks in Stillwater and Owatonna. Red Wing’s century-old pipes are currently getting necessary upgrades so that factors into some of the increased cost.

Our topography also makes a difference. We all love the beautiful river and bluffs, but Red Wing’s hills require several stations to pump groundwater from wells into six separate water pressure zones, each zone covering a different area of the city. For the city’s highest neighborhoods, the water needs to travel almost a quarter-mile up—further than what’s required in most cities. That means we need more equipment, power, and infrastructure than most towns. Plus, living next to creeks, streams, and the largest river in the country requires us to have systems in place to ensure we’re doing our best to maintain clean waterways.

Even with these challenges, the City is making sure Red Wing’s water and sewer rates are lower than what is designated as affordable by the Public Facilities Authority and USDA Rural Development.

How can I learn more or connect with someone at the City? The City will hold a series of open houses on this topic in the lower level of the Red Wing Public Library. The public is invited to come on Tuesday, May 10 at 6 p.m. Landlords and business owners are invited to attend on Wednesday, May 18 at 6 p.m. Staff will be available to answer questions and provide more information based on your individual situation.

For immediate questions, you can call the City’s Public Works Department at 651-385-3674. You can also contact Deputy Director of Utilities Jerry Plein, at jerry.plein@ci.red-wing.mn.us / 651-385-5112 or Environmental Services Manager Kelsey VanDeusen at kelsey.van.deusen@ci.red-wing.mn.us / 651-385-5143. The City is happy to talk with you or meet with your business or organization.

You can also visit the city's website at www.red-wing.org.

Red Wing's Water 101

Where does our household water in Red Wing come from? The water that comes out of your tap (and your shower, dishwasher, washing machine, etc.) has a long route to your front door. It comes from two aquifers called the Mount Simon and Mount Simon-Fond Du Lac aquifers. What's an aquifer? It's a large area of rock, way below the soil under us, that holds groundwater from rain and snow in its nooks and crannies. In Red Wing, that aquifer is mostly sandstone and shale, and getting water out from the depths of that rock takes work.

Red Wing has five wells, each ranging from 630 to 655 feet deep, that tap into one of the two aquifers. Then, pumps force the water out at 1,200 to 1,500 gallons per minute. The raw water contains a number of natural contaminants we don't want, so it has to be treated at our local water treatment facilities.

Where are our Water Treatment Facilities? Red Wing has two facilities. The Twin Bluffs building is on Pioneer Road west of Twin Bluff School, and the Charlson Crest building is near Burnside School. Both were built about 20 years ago. The City will be hosting tours this summer so you can see the processes first-hand.

What do our water treatment facilities do? One purpose of the water treatment plants is to remove unwanted elements from the groundwater. Radionuclides are an example. Radionuclides occur naturally in the environment all around us, and in small amounts, they're not a problem. But as radionuclides decay, they create radiation so they can cause health problems if we come into too much contact with them. The water treatment facilities make sure our water is safe from too many radionuclides. The facilities also remove iron and manganese, which can cause red or black stains on clothes and dishware and can cause pipes to clog over time.

Cleaning raw water into useable water is just part of the job, though. While we all need clean water coming into our house, we also need the dirty water removed. After each of us uses the clean water in our homes, the city's 110 miles of sewer pipes carry all the dirty water out discretely underground, and the treatment plant cleans it up before the water reenters the environment through the Mississippi River—all in a way that's safe for us, the river, and the whole city.