

Charles County Government Water & Sewer Customer Handbook



Department of Fiscal Services Water/Sewer Billing
P.O. Box 1630 La Plata, Maryland 20646
www.charlescounty.org



Mission Statement

The mission of Charles County Government is to provide our citizens the highest quality service possible in a timely, efficient, and courteous manner.

To achieve this goal government must be operated in an open and accessible atmosphere, be based on comprehensive long- and short-term planning, and have an appropriate managerial organization tempered by fiscal responsibility.

*This customer handbook explains our
customer service policies.
Please retain it for future reference.*

WAYNE COOPER, PRESIDENT

ROBERT J. FULLER • CANDICE QUINN KELLY

EDITH J. PATTERSON, ED.D. • ALLAN R. SMITH

**EUGENE LAUER
COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR**

*County Commissioners
of Charles County*

P.O. Box 2150 • La Plata, Maryland 20646
301-645-0550 • Metro 301-870-3000 • Toll Free 877-809-8790
TDD 1-800-735-2258 or 711 • Fax: 301-645-0560

June 2005

This handbook has been developed and is being provided to you as part of the County's enhanced customer service program. It is intended to assist you with questions and concerns about your water and/or sewer service, and will hopefully provide you with a better understanding of our service delivery system.

Should this booklet contain information that you do not fully understand, or if questions still remain after you have had an opportunity to read it, please do not hesitate to contact the Department of Fiscal Services or the Department of Utilities for additional clarification.

It is our goal to provide you with the highest level of service in the most efficient and least costly manner possible. Your questions and comments are always encouraged and welcomed.

Very truly,

**COUNTY COMMISSIONERS OF
CHARLES COUNTY, MARYLAND**

Wayne Cooper, President

Robert J. Fuller
District 4

Edith J. Patterson, Ed.D.
District 2

Candice Quinn Kelly
District 1

Allan R. Smith
District 3

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HOW TO CONTACT US

Your satisfaction is our number-one priority. If you have any questions, suggestions or complaints:

Call us at
301-645-0624 or 301-870-2542

Weekday Office Hours

(except holidays)

Billing Office	8:00 A.M.–4:30 P.M.
Treasurer's Office	8:00 A.M.–4:30 P.M.
Department of Utilities	7:00 A.M.–3:00 P.M.

Please obtain the name of the representative assisting you. If you are not satisfied after speaking to a customer service representative, ask to speak to the immediate supervisor.

Emergency After Hours

Problems with your water and/or sewer service, such as low water pressure or sewer backup, may be considered an EMERGENCY.

In the event of an emergency, the Department of Utilities has an answering service available after 3:00 P.M., for use after hours, holidays, and weekends, at 301-609-7400.

NOTE–Water turned off as a result of failure to pay by the due date is not considered an emergency and after hours emergency personnel are not authorized to turn the water back on.

Written Correspondence

Written correspondence indicating change of address, comments, compliments, or questions should be addressed to:

Charles County Government
Department of Fiscal Services
Water and Sewer Billing
P.O. Box 2150
La Plata, MD 20646
(Do not mail payments to this address)

Fax: 301-885-1313.
Email address: dfs@charlescounty.org
Web address: www.charlescounty.org

To help process your information efficiently please provide the following information:

- Your name
- The account/customer number and service address
- A daytime phone number (including area code) where you can be reached
- A brief summary of the inquiry, request or problem
- Copies of water/sewer bills and canceled checks, if the question is about billing
- Other information to help us understand your problem or concern

Please do not write notes on the bill stub or include correspondence with your payments. Payments are addressed to the Treasurer's Office not the Billing Office.

Driving Directions

From Waldorf, take 301 South to La Plata, approximately 7 miles. Take a left on Route 6 (Charles Street) East. Take left on Washington Avenue at first light. Make first left into the Charles County Government Building/Charles County Courthouse (200 Baltimore Street) parking lot.

Payments

Checks and money orders should be made payable to Charles County Government. The payment stub (top part) of your water/sewer bill is designed to fit the return envelope provided with your water/sewer bill. If you should misplace that envelope or need to send a payment in another envelope, please address the envelope to:

Charles County Government
P.O. Box 1630
La Plata, MD 20646-1630

Payments only should be sent to this address. Please do not send correspondence to P.O. Box 1630. Correspondence can be sent to the P.O. Box 2150 address previously listed.

YOUR UTILITY BILL

Your utility bill has:

- previous and current read dates
- the number of days for which you are being billed
- your previous and present readings plus total usage
- the read type, “A” for actual reading and “E” for estimated reading
- a breakdown of charges with the amount per 1,000 gallons of water consumption
- the Bay Restoration Fee

All meter readings and billings are on a quarterly basis unless it is your first or last billing. The sewer fee is based on the amount of water that flows through your meter.

Minimum Bill: The minimum bill for water and/or sewer service will be the customer account fee.

Rates

The water and sewer rates are reviewed annually during the budget process and are subject to change. Changes in the rates are usually effective on July 1 each year and remain unchanged until July 1 of the following year. Public Hearings are held by the Charles County Commissioners before any new rates are adopted. You are invited and encouraged to attend these meetings and participate in the rate setting process. Please call 301-645-0624 or 301-870-2542 if you have any questions on the current rates charged. The annual adopted rate and fee schedule can also be found at www.charlescounty.org.

Billing Inquiries

If you have questions concerning your bill, the steps on pages 6-7 will assist you. Please notify us prior to the due date on the invoice if there is a problem.

While we are investigating a billing inquiry, payment will not be required for the amount in question and we will not assess any additional late charges until the matter is resolved. However, this deferral does not apply to any other amounts owed previously or subsequently to the amount in question.



Paying Your Bill

You may pay your bill in several convenient ways:

By Mail—Simply return the top remittance portion of your bill and your check or money order in the return envelope provided with your bill. Send a check or money order (**NEVER CASH**) made payable to **Charles County Government** to the Department of Fiscal Services, P.O. Box 1630, La Plata, MD 20646-1630. **Please write your account number and customer number on your check or money order** to assure proper credit to your account.

By Night Depository. A depository box is located at the Charles County Government Building, corner of Washington Avenue and Baltimore Street, in La Plata, on the side of the building at the Visitor Entrance. Payments are picked up daily by 8:00 A.M. and posted to accounts by 9:00 A.M. that day. Any payments dropped in the night depository after 8:00 A.M. will be posted the next business day. **Please do not use CASH.**

Treasurer's Office. The Treasurer's Office is located in the Charles County Government building, corner of Washington Avenue and Baltimore Street, in La Plata. Payment of cash, check, cashiers check, or money order will be accepted during normal office hours between 8:00 A.M. and 4:30 P.M., Monday through Friday, except holidays. Always request a receipt.

By Official Payments Corporation (OPC). You may now pay your water/sewer bill with the following credit cards: MasterCard, American Express and Discover. VISA is not accepted. To pay by credit card you may call OPC at 1-888-272-9829 enter 3003 for Charles County Government payments. You may also pay online at www.charlescounty.org and click on E-Services. OPC does charge a fee for this service. The amount of the fee is based on the

amount of the payment and is automatically charged to your transaction. It takes 2 to 3 business days for this transaction to be posted to your water/sewer account. Payment is not considered accepted until it is posted to your account. Do not use this process to reconnect service, avoid disconnection of service, or to avoid a penalty without allowing 2 to 3 business days for your payment to be posted. Make sure you receive a confirmation number of your transaction. If you do not receive a confirmation number your transaction may not have processed properly.

Returned Check Fee

A fee is charged for each returned check. Returned checks are automatically re-deposited. Returned checks are charged back to your account and are considered non-payment. Cash, certified check or money order for the amount of the returned check plus the fee is required. Accounts with three returned checks will be placed on a “**CASH ONLY**” basis which means that only cash, certified check, or money order will be accepted as payment on your account. **NO CHECKS** will be accepted on a “**CASH ONLY**” account. You may request, in writing, to be removed from “**CASH ONLY**” basis after two years. Your request will be evaluated and you will be notified of any decision. If removed from “**CASH ONLY**”, any additional returned checks will result in immediate return to “**CASH ONLY**” status again.

Late Payment Charges

Payments are due on or before the due date shown on your bill. Your date of payment is the date on which payment is **received** by us. If we do not **receive** your payment on or before the due date, a late payment penalty of 10% of the unpaid bill is assessed, and 3% interest will be charged on any amounts in arrears.

Payment Plans

Unusual circumstances may warrant a payment plan which allows you to spread out payments without additional penalties being added. You must submit a written request for a Deferred Payment Plan prior to the invoice due date. Payment Plans should be paid off before the next bill date. If the Payment Plan overlaps future bills a lien may be placed on the property until the Payment Plan is paid in full. All future bills must be paid by their due date. Tenants must acquire permission from their landlords for payment plans.



Bay Restoration Fund

Beginning January 1, 2005, water and sewer customers will contribute to the State Fund to clean up the Chesapeake Bay and other Maryland waterways. The Bay Restoration Fund is a dedicated State fund that will be used to upgrade sewer plants in Maryland. The goal is to reduce the amount of nitrogen flowing into Maryland waters by 7.5 million pounds per year and phosphorus by over a quarter-million pounds a year by 2011.

For additional information, please visit the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) website at www.mde.state.md.water/CBWRF or call 410-537-3567.

METERS AND METER READINGS

The water meter indicates how much water you use. Charles County Government owns and maintains all water meters. It is your responsibility to provide Charles County Government personnel with reasonable access to the meter and the area around it. The County Government Meter Technicians and Utilities personnel wear uniforms and carry identification. Please call us at 301-645-0624 or 301-870-2542 if you have any doubt about their identity.



Most water meters are located inside your house with remote meter reading boxes mounted on the outside of the house. New water meters now being installed do not have remote meter reading boxes. The readings are transmitted by radio frequency. Your bill is based on meter readings taken every three months. If the meter cannot be read, we will estimate your bill and provide you with a letter requesting access to your water meter. If you fail to respond within the time frame given, your service may be interrupted.

Estimated Readings

Occasionally, it may be necessary to estimate your bill based on a quarterly average. This will be adjusted to actual the next time your meter is read.

Verifying Your Meter Reading

If you are checking your meter reading against the bill you received, please remember that your reading should be slightly higher because you are reading it a few days later than the meter readers. If you have a meter in your house with a remote meter box mounted on the outside of your house, take the reading from the remote meter box located outside your house. These numbers indicate the total water used. Subtract your previous reading from the current reading to arrive at the current consumption. The meter in your house may also be read for comparison. If you do not have a remote meter box, the actual meter should be used.

Checking For Leaks

Your house should be checked periodically for water leaks. To do this, simply make sure all faucets are turned off and no appliance that uses water (Washing Machine, Dishwasher or Ice-Maker) is on. Go to the meter and see if the numbers change. If everything in the house (including outside faucets) is off and the meter is changing, this is an indication you may have a leak. A simple test can be done to check for toilet leaks. Put a small amount of blue or green food coloring into the tank of the toilet and don't use it for four to eight hours. If any of the coloring shows in the toilet bowl your toilet is leaking. Toilet leaks are the most common leaks in a household and should be checked periodically. Most of the time the leak in the toilet is caused by a deteriorated rubber flap in the flushing mechanism. This flap can easily be replaced. Call a plumber if necessary and correct any problem as soon as possible. You will be billed for **all** water used whether or not it is caused by leaks or broken pipes. No adjustments to your bill will be made due to leaks.

Occasionally you may receive a letter or notification from us that your consumption appears to be unusually high and we may suggest that you check for leaks. The Department of Utilities provides a leak test service. To request a leak test, call the billing office at 301-645-0624 or 301-870-2542. The owner or agent must sign for this test to be done. You must be home for this test. A fee is charged for this service.

Meter Tests

If you question the accuracy of your water meter reading, you may request that the meter be re-read or tested. In our experience faulty meters rarely register high. To request a meter test, call the billing office at 301-645-0624 or 301-870-2542 during normal business hours to schedule an appointment. You must be home for this service. Your existing meter will be removed and a new meter will be installed. Your old meter will be sent to an independent testing lab. The meter sent for testing will not be re-installed. If the test results indicate that the meter is registering between 96% and 104% of the actual flow under varying flow rates, the cost of the test



will be added to your account. However, if the test indicates the meter is registering a flow above the acceptable range, the meter test fee will be waived and adjustments to your account may be warranted.

Relocating Your Meter

Your water meter may be located in the ground or mounted inside your house. The location was selected by the builder when your home was built according to the ordinance in effect at that time.

If you are considering remodeling and would like your water meter moved, please call the Department of Utilities in advance before your remodeling project starts. This will allow time to complete any work you authorize. You will need to hire a plumber to relocate the lines at your expense. A fee will be charged to have the meter removed and reinstalled.

New Siding

If you are replacing your siding and have a remote register attached to the outside of your home, please call the Department of Utilities to set up an appointment to have a radio read meter installed in your home. There is no fee for this service.

Water Theft

Tampering with a water meter is illegal and all illegal actions will be pursued. If you are aware of tampering or illegal connections, or if you suspect such activity, please call the Department of Fiscal Services at 301-645-0624 or 301-870-2542. You do not have to leave your name, just the location.

TO APPLY FOR WATER SERVICE

Contact us by telephone or in writing to begin water service.

Two people can be named as customer of record. No security deposit is required.

If You Are Renting

If you are a tenant, the owner must submit to us a signed renter authorization form, authorizing Fiscal Services to bill you directly. If the owner does not complete the form, the bill will continue to be sent directly to the owner. The owner of the property is ultimately responsible for the water/sewer charges and fees.

If You Are Moving

Please give us notice of at least 3 to 5 working days prior to moving when requesting a final reading. Requests for final readings may be made by phone or in writing. Please have available your forwarding address or the Title Company's address if they are holding an escrow, the new owner's name, and the settlement date. The water is not disconnected at the time of the final reading, the account is transferred to the new owner directly. Final readings can be scheduled Monday through Friday excluding holidays.

Access to the meter may be necessary for a final reading. If we cannot acquire access to read the meter, your final bill will be estimated.

If you are a Title Company or landlord and wish to fax your request to the water/sewer billing office, please contact us and we will send you the correct final reading form to use for your requests.

DISCONNECTION OF SERVICE

For Non-Payment Of Bill

We make every effort to avoid terminating water service to our customers. If you are having difficulty paying your water bill, please contact us immediately upon receiving your bill to request our assistance in granting a possible extension or setting up a payment plan.

You will be notified, by mail, in writing, 10 days prior to the disconnect date. This notification will be in the form of a Past Due Notice indicating that a 10% penalty has been added to your account, and 3% interest will be charged on any amounts in arrears. This Past Due Notice will indicate the date your water will be disconnected if payment in full is not received the previous business day by 4:30 P.M. If you are a tenant, a copy of this Past Due Notice will also be sent to your landlord.

Do not wait to receive the Past Due Notice to find out your disconnect date before sending in your payment. You may be disconnected 10 days after your due date on your original bill. We are not responsible for misplaced or lost mail. We do not call customers to inform them of their disconnect date. If you are unsure of any balance due on your account you can view your account online at www.charlescounty.org and click on E-Services. You will need your account and customer numbers for this service.

If your service is disconnected, we will leave a written notice on your door. This notice provides a telephone number you can call for more information. The Meter Technicians cannot accept payments.

Water service can only be restored when the outstanding amounts on the account are paid. You will need to notify the Water/Sewer Billing office once your bill is paid before 3:00 P.M. to get your services restored. Should you fail to notify the office before 3:00 P.M. your services may not be restored until the next business day. It is recommended a responsible person (not a minor) be present at the location in order for the service to be reconnected. However, if your service has been off for more than two days you will need to set up an appointment to have the water turned back on. Someone must be present at the time of the appointment. This is necessary to ensure that no faucets have been left in the on position which could result in water or other damages to the house.

A re-connection fee will be charged. Balances which remain outstanding will result in water service not being restored and a lien being placed on the property.

Per Your Request

If you would like to have your water disconnected for an extended period of time, please provide us with a written request which includes the dates for disconnection. You will continue to receive a minimum bill for this time period. A fee will be charged when the water is disconnected. An appointment must be made and a responsible person must be present to have the service reconnected. There is no additional fee for a reconnection under these circumstances.

Dispute Procedures

You can discuss your bill, service, turn-off/turn-on or any other discrepancy or concern, with any one of our customer service representatives, during normal business hours (8:00 am - 4:30 P.M. Monday through Friday) except holidays.

Special Circumstances

If a permanent member of your household is **handicapped, seriously ill or relies on life support equipment** where disruption of water service could cause immediate harm to that individual, please advise us of this circumstance in writing and include a physician's statement.

In these special instances, water service will not be disconnected for non-payment and special arrangements must be made to pay the outstanding bills. Should you fail to pay the bill a lien will be placed on the property.

SEWER BACK-UP PROBLEMS

Please contact the Department of Utilities at 301-609-7400 IMMEDIATELY if there is a sewer problem.

The Department of Utilities personnel will determine, at no charge, whether the problem is within the County lines. If the problem is on the private side of the sewer lines, you will be notified on-site that you will need to contact a plumber.

Wipe Out the Grease Glob

Never pour grease down sink drains or into toilets. Cooking grease often gets washed down the kitchen sink drain where it can stick to the inside of sewer pipes in your home and under the streets. Over time, grease can build up, it can block the sewer pipes which can result in costly and messy sewer backups and overflows. If the blockage occurs between the customer's house (or place of business) and the public sewer lines, the customer must bear the financial burden of repairs and cleanup. This can be very costly to the customer. Instead of pouring grease down a drain, wait for the grease to cool, scrape it together in a pan, wipe it up with a paper towel and throw the paper towel in the trash. Cooking grease will decompose in the landfill, but not in the sewer lines. Alternately, pour grease into a disposable container (coffee can, etc.) and place it in the freezer to solidify. On trash day, put the frozen grease in the trash for pick up. Remember to use the **SWAT** technique to prevent grease problems: **Scrape it, Wipe it, And Trash it.** For further information on preventing grease problems, please contact the Department of Utilities.

Call Before You Dig Or Build

Most water-service line breaks are the result of people digging before they have called Miss Utilities to locate the utility lines. Anyone who damages utility services is liable for the cost of repairs, which can be very expensive.

Call Miss Utilities at least 48 hours before you dig or build, at 1-800-257-7777. Your lines will be located and marked at no charge. Water service lines will only be marked to County Right of Ways.

Before you dig be sure no water lines are below. It is a violation of zoning codes to build any structure over a water line.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **When will I receive my bills?**

All meter readings and billings are on a quarterly basis, around 90 days, unless it is your first or last billing.

- **Why is the sewer portion of my bill high?**

The sewer fee is based on the amount of water that flows through your meter. We do not adjust for watering lawns, filling pools, washing cars or leaks.

- **If I have no water in my home, what do I do?**

If you have paid your bill on time, check the main shut off valve in your home to verify it was not accidentally shut off. If it is on, check your front door to see if a disconnect notice was left. If there is no notice on your door then contact the billing office at 301-645-0624 for assistance.

- **Sewage is backed up in my home, whom should I call?**

Call the Department of Utilities at 301-609-7400 before calling a plumber. Someone will come to your residence and determine if it is a blockage in the county lines or your lines. If the blockage is in your lines you will need to contact a plumber.

- **How do I access my account information online?**

Visit www.charlescounty.org, click on E-Services then Water & Sewer Account Inquiry. You must have your account and customer numbers to access this service.

- **How do I change my name on my account because I am now married or divorced?**

If you are now married, please send in your request for name change with a copy of your marriage certificate. If you are divorced, we will need a copy of your driver's license, the name changed on the deed section, or a copy of the court ordered Absolute Divorce.

- **What is the Account Maintenance Fee?**

The water/sewer fund is a self-supporting entity. The Account Maintenance Fee covers the expense of maintaining each account. This includes quarterly readings, requested readings, processing invoices, postage and customer service.

Frequently Asked Questions By Landlords

- **Who's responsible for a delinquent bill while the tenant is in the property?**

If the tenant refuses to pay...We will cut off the water 10 days after the due date or date listed on the Penalty Notice. If still not paid, the landlord will receive a notice stating if the tenant does not pay or we do not hear from the landlord a lien will be placed on the property.

Sewer Accounts: Since we are unable to disconnect sewer, if the tenant refuses to pay after the Penalty Notice has been sent, the landlord will receive a lien notice, same as above.

- **Why can't the tenant's bill be transferred to their new place of residence?**

We cannot make a new landlord responsible for the tenant's previous bills at another property. We do not ask for driver's license or social security numbers which would enable us to track the tenant. We do not collect deposits. The *owner* of the property is responsible for the water and sewer bills.

- **Can the landlord request to have the water turned off for bad tenants?**

The water can only be turned off for nonpayment of a bill, repairs, or if the property is vacant. Water disconnection cannot be used as a tool to evict tenants. This must be done through the court system.

- **I received a final notice from the billing office notifying me that the final bill has not been paid. My tenants told me they paid the bill. Why wasn't I notified earlier there was an outstanding balance before I gave my tenants back their deposit?**

We make every effort to notify the landlord of any balances on their account. A copy of the final bill is sent to the landlord at the time of billing. A copy of the Past Due Notice is also sent to the landlord if the final bill is still not paid. If there is no response to the Past Due Notice, a final notice is sent to the owner and tenant. It is the owner's responsibility to verify that all the utility bills are paid. Landlords can call the billing office to verify this information or review their tenants account online at www.charlescounty.org.

- **Why do I have to fill out a Renter's Form?**

The renter's form is an agreement between the county and the landlord authorizing us to send the bills to the tenant. It also confirms your understanding that if the tenants don't pay, as owner of the property, you are ultimately responsible for the water/sewer charges and fees.

- **Can I get a copy of the original bills too?**

Yes. Contact our office and we will be happy to set this up for you. Please notify us each time you have a new tenant if you would like to receive the bills and notices too. You can indicate this in writing when you submit the renter's form. You must do this for each new tenant in your property.

- **If there is a credit on the account who gets the refund?**

If you pay the final invoice and your tenant also pays, we will refund the credit balance to the landlord.



Sample meter



Sample meter register



Sample meter-read equipment

CUSTOMER SERVICES

Department of Fiscal Services

8:00 A.M.–4:30 P.M.

301-645-0624 • or 301-870-2542

Fax 301-885-1313

Department of Utilities

7:00 A.M.–3:00 P.M.

301-609-7400 or 301-753-8270

After-hours answering service: 301-609-7400

Mailing Address

Payments only

Charles County Government
Department of Fiscal Services

P.O. Box 1630

La Plata, MD 20646-1630

Other Correspondence

Charles County Government
Department of Fiscal Services

Water/Sewer Billing

P.O. Box 2150

La Plata, MD 20646

Sending Email

Send your email to:

dfs@charlescounty.org

Review Water/Sewer Accounts Online

www.charlescounty.org/eservices.htm



Charles County Government
Department of Fiscal Services
Water/Sewer Billing
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