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Cape water bills could jump

Council looks for ways to offset improvement costs

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Cape Coral residents are looking at a 33.5 percent total increase in their water and sewer bills over the next four years.

The city council still has to approve the change, which will become effective Oct. 1 if it is passed, council members learned during their non-voting workshop Monday afternoon.

No change is planned for the irrigation water rate of \$9.50 a month.

Other utility costs also are on the way for new utilities customers.

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Impact fees charged to the owners of new construction could go up at least 12 percent this year, and residents of the next utilities expansion area will be charged about \$22,000 for water, sewer and irrigation lines. The next area roughly is bordered by Veterans and Mohawk parkways and Skyline and Chiquita boulevards.

The customer rate hike will take the average bill of \$57 to \$76 a month in 2010. The money it will raise is needed to help finance \$564 million of system improvements.

Financial Services Director Mark Mason described three options for the rate increase to the council during the workshop. All raised rates by about the same percentage.

Mason said he thought it was clear the council doesn't want an increase in irrigation fees. The other two options would have raised the irrigation rate as much as 11 percent.

Resident John Harrop said Mason's presentation was based on complex reports the public should be able to look at.

"These reports are a matter of public record. Why aren't they on the Internet," Harrop asked. "We've got the Internet. Let's use it for something other than posting Social Security numbers."

Newcomers will help pay for some of the improvements, which include new water and sewer plants in north Cape Coral and expanded plants south of Pine Island Road.

The 12 percent impact fee is built into the financing plan, Mason said.

The impact fees for water, sewer and irrigation water total \$4,309. A 12 percent increase would add \$517. The increase might even be higher depending on the results of a review now under way, he said.

Mason said the city has the ability to collect impact fees five years in advance. But resident Richard Servello said officials never took advantage of that.

"It's hard to understand why they're not collecting that," Servello said.

Mason also told the council that he will ask the council, when he presents the results of the study, to approve a policy of collecting impact fees five years before utilities are installed.

Harrop and Servello also wondered why the staff didn't propose a bond issue to finance the improvements.

A bond issue could have added \$2.50 per \$1,000 of taxable property to the tax bill in order to pay off the bond, according to Mason.

The time needed to get a bond issue before the voters also was a factor, City Manager Terry Stewart said.

"Timing is a significant issue," Stewart said. "We are running out of capacity. We are growing at rate 1,200 to 1,300 people a month," Stewart said.

The council later Monday approved a \$103 million contract with MWH Americas to extend water and sewer lines into Southwest Four in 2007 and to complete other projects in the area. The project includes \$85.5 million to extend the collection and distribution lines. The \$22,000 assessments will cover that portion of the contract.

The assessment does not include impact fees or plumbing costs involved with tying a home into the system, Barron said.

Notices announcing the assessments will be sent out later this month. A public meeting to discuss the project is scheduled for Tuesday, June 6, at Ida S. Baker High School. The owners of about 8,800 properties will get the notices.

The assessment is double the assessment property owners were charged in 2002 in the Southwest One area, according to Mason. Materials and labor have gone up 40 percent in some cases since then, Mason said.

There's also a layer of rock in that section of the city that will have to be removed, Public Works Director Chuck Pavlos said. The rock covers 42 percent of the path for the pipelines, Pavlos said. Rock was a problem only for about 8 percent of the pipeline paths in previous projects, Pavlos said.

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