

Local customers get unwelcome surprise from new drainage fee

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What a difference a few months makes.

In a heated and close election last November, Houston voters narrowly approved a referendum calling for a new drainage impact fee as part of a two-decade, \$8 billion "pay-as-you-go" infrastructure program. In April, City Council overwhelmingly approved an ordinance implementing the program, now called "Rebuild Houston."

During both the referendum election and the ordinance discussions, supporters including Mayor Annise Parker and Councilman Stephen Costello made repeated assurances that the impact fee for the average homeowner would be about \$5 per month.

But when sample bills for the new fee went out recently, many homeowners were surprised to see their bill were higher than that — in many cases, much higher.

Last week, Parker admitted that the \$5 estimate was wrong, and that the average bill would more likely be around \$8.25 per month. The administration said the figure had been based on the city's estimate of the size of an average home, about 5,000 square feet of property with 1,875 feet of what's called "impervious surface" — that is, structures like roofs or driveways that don't allow rainfall to be absorbed.

Since then, the city has done new calculations and determined that a typical Houston home is on 7,500 square feet with 2,850 square feet of impervious surface.

Parker told media representative and City Council members that her administration would work to find ways to find ways to bring the average bill closer to the \$5 figure. But there's been little word on what the solutions might be since.

Critics of the Rebuild Houston program — notably former Harris County Tax Assessor-Collector Paul Bettencourt — leapt on the mayor's admission as proof of their claims that voters were misled by the language of the ballot initiative and the campaign.

Among those voters who never bought the referendum's promises is Dan Harris, who lives in the Bonham Acres neighborhood in southwest Houston near Sharpstown.

Harris owns a 1950s-era, 2,400-square foot ranch-style home sitting on a one-and-a-quarter-acre property. The property has a long, concrete driveway leading to an attached garage. He also built another driveway leading to the front door made of intricately designed paving stones, meant to protect the root systems of the trees in the front yard.

Harris, a professional civil engineer, said he expected that with the two driveways, as well as an enclosed deck in the backyard, he expected his bill would be somewhat higher than the \$5 figure, somewhere closer to \$8. But when he received his sample bill in early May, he was surprised to find that it was for \$25.31 — which amounts to about \$300 annually.

"It's alarming to me," said Harris, who moved with his wife from a larger home in Meyerland a few years ago to reduce his property taxes.

Harris said that when the Rebuild Houston program was first being discussed last year, he was an early supporter. But when he did the math based on the \$5 figure, he said he "couldn't square" how the city planned to raise the money it said it needed.

Harris said he believes the Parker administration and Costello knew well before the election the figure was too low, and that's why the "impervious area" was never clearly defined leading up to the vote.

He said he plans to appeal his bill through the city's appeal process. But he also plans to take his complaints to the state attorney general's office.

District C Councilwoman Anne Clutterbuck, who voted for the ordinance implementing Rebuild Houston, told The Examiner she doesn't believe anything nefarious happened in the election.

But Clutterbuck conceded she was troubled by the Parker administration's admission of error, and last week sent out two emails to her constituents detailing her concerns.

Clutterbuck, who is leaving office at the end of this year because of term limits, noted that her largely affluent district was the largest supporter of the referendum among the city's council districts. While she still believes the program is necessary to repair Houston's infrastructure, she was alarmed enough to call the mayor directly to voice her concerns.

For now, though, all Clutterbuck — and every other resident — can do is wait to see what solutions Parker ultimately presents.