

OPINION

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A COMMUNITY EDITORIAL BOARD OPINION

Stewardship of water

Cape Fear Public Utility Authority | Rates must encourage conservation

Those who use water by the sip should not be penalized with higher rates so that water guzzlers can get a break on their bills. So while the Cape Fear Public Utility Authority considers revising its rate structure to better reflect the typical customer's usage, it also must not lose sight of the best argument for its three-tiered system: conservation.

The authority is scheduled to vote next week to modify its water and sewer rates to head off complaints that its water rates are unfair to people with large families. It proposes to bump the lowest tier from 9,000 gallons per two-month cycle to 12,000 gallons. But it also would reduce the overall cost to the thirstiest consumers by allowing greater consumption at lower rates.

While some adjustments may be warranted, the authority should continue to support a rate structure that discourages excessive water usage.

The main complaint is that the current rates punish large families that use more water. That's true. But the solution would increase rates for the sippers a little while reducing bills for the highest users.

Water flows freely from our taps, but it is not an unlimited resource. North Carolina is growing rapidly, and so is its demand for

THEIR VIEWS

Murray Sherman: Human nature is not going to change. We will conserve only if there is an immediate supply crisis or if we pay more as we consume more. In almost all cases people choose to have large families. The economic consequences are their responsibilities.

Shirley Hart Berry: An increasing tier may or may not have the desired conservation effects. A flat rate per unit is the most fair as those who use less obviously pay less.

water. During the recent droughts lakes that served cities in the Triangle were becoming dangerously low, and towns prepared for a battle over water rights.

The CFPUA gets water from the Cape Fear River and from a series of wells in northern New Hanover County that tap into the Castle Hayne Aquifer. As more water is pulled from the aquifer to quench the thirst of a rapidly growing region, concerns about shortages will also grow.

It's not difficult to see the day when drinking water in North Carolina becomes a precious commodity.

The tiered rate system encourages conservation. It's a simple and fair concept: As you use more water, you pay a higher rate.

Rates have been a point of contention since the authority was formed last June, and some of the problems are of the utility's making. Their notoriously flawed

billing system was so backed up that some customers went months without getting a bill, then got socked with a whopper.

Billing cycles were erratic and often longer than the customary two-month period, which drove some modest users into higher tiers, where they paid more. Residents outside the city of Wilmington also started paying by the number of gallons rather than the county's optional flat rate, which practically invited users to waste water.

Rates for many users are higher now, as officials told us they would be even before the authority was formed. But for years rates were kept relatively low while little maintenance was done on water and sewer lines. The result of that neglect spewed a few summers ago from sewer pipes and into back yards and tidal creeks.

You get what you pay for.

CFPUA must be accountable and responsive to its customers, but it should never be pressured into backing off policies that will keep the system in good repair and help conserve water for future generations of Cape Fear area residents.

Water is a valuable resource; let's hope it never becomes so scarce that we find out how much people are really willing to pay for it.