



What's Happening?

September 22, 2008

Items of Interest from the Desk of
Honorable Mayor Tom Meyer

Greetings! I hope you are all getting outside to enjoy the beautiful fall weather before winter sets in. I look forward to continuing to use this column to inform the citizens of Altoona on City business matters and to answer questions I've heard from many of you.

Recently it came to my attention there are questions from community members about the City's policy to disconnect water service for nonpayment of utility bills with balances owed over \$100. This policy was initiated about a year ago beginning with the 2nd quarter 2007 billing. Included with the billing was information explaining the policy change.

Prior to the policy change the City carried the unpaid billings on its books until placing the balance owed on customers' property tax bills and collecting the shortfall when taxes were paid. This practice was problematic in many ways.

Foremost was the amount of time the City carried upwards of \$80,000 in unpaid billings on its books and the implications this practice had for the rates due from paying customers.

For example, if a customer failed to pay their bill for the first quarter of 2007, it is possible the City would not collect the full balance owed until July 2008 with the second tax payment. The interest lost, or interest paid to other City funds to cover cash flow requirements, could result in increased rates to other customers who paid their bills on time. This just wasn't fair to customers who paid their bills in a timely manner each quarter.

In the case of rental property tenants who did not pay, it was often the landlord who got stuck with the bill after the tenant was long gone. Again, not fair.

Another interesting twist to placing the unpaid balance on the annual tax statement was this practice presented the opportunity for delinquent customers to report the full amount of the balance owed to the IRS as eligible for a property tax deduction. The problem is this practice is not legal.

The change in policy has worked. As noted above, the City routinely had close to \$80,000 in uncollected billings at the end of the calendar year. Now, the balance is about \$26,000. People are now paying on time to avoid the water disconnection.

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Please know the City is not interested in exasperating problems for people facing real financial hardships. I know times are tough and getting tougher. So, if customers are having a difficult time making ends meet, and need time to pay, the City allows payment plans to be set up by stopping down at City Hall and speaking with Finance Department staff. As long as the customer sticks to the payment plan, the customer's water remains in service.

I have also been hearing requests from citizens to establish set office hours for the City's Building Inspector. The City has only one inspector, who must spend a lot of time in the field; therefore, he is often not at City Hall when people stop by and they must come back later after setting an appointment.

To address the scheduling issue, the City's Building Inspector, Eric Velin, will have regular office hours Monday-Thursday from 11:00 AM to 1:00 PM. This will provide customers the opportunity to stop by and talk to Eric over their lunch breaks or to set another meeting date if more time is required.

As you are aware, we have a big election coming up on November 4th. If you are not a registered voter or have changed your Altoona address, please visit our website and download the voter registration form to register. If you aren't going to be around town for the election, you can download the absentee request application from our website as well. Finally, if you are unsure which ward you are located in, you can check our map or ward locator on the website.

Please take advantage of these forms being available online. It will help you get through the voting process much more quickly on Election Day. Also, remember voting is at Altoona City Hall for all voters.

If you have any questions or comments please contact me at cityhall@ci.altoona.wi.us. Thank you for the opportunity to serve you.

Mayor Tom Meyer