

Water: Should Everyone Pay For What They Use?

If Supervisor Grace has his way, 2,100 water district taxpayers will continue to subsidize the district's remaining 7,900 taxpayers.

While the 2,100 taxpayers with water meters that record 99.9% of their usage will pay for all the water they use, 7,900 taxpayers will pay considerably less than their fair share; those with meters that only record 50% of their usage, will pay only half of what they should be paying.

And every year, year after year, district taxpayers will lose out on an estimated \$250,000 in additional revenue and savings.

Supervisor Grace doesn't like the meter modernization project that was started in 2011. He's put road blocks in the way of completing Phase I of the project and is now saying that the investment of \$2 million to complete Phase II doesn't make sense because Phase I has only saved "pennies." (The \$2 million will come from the water district's existing fund balance and would not increase taxes.)

Why is Supervisor Grace so opposed to the project? Why is he so dismissive of the many reasons why replacing antiquated and inefficient meters with new more efficient digital technology makes sense for the water district's 10,000 taxpayers?

Some Background: The water meter replacement project was designed to replace all 10,000 existing meters with more accurate, more efficiently read new meters. Currently, it takes two full time meter readers to read the district's 7,900 old fashioned meters three times a year. At each location, the meter reader gets out of the car and reads the meter into a handheld computer. Then, roughly twice a week, the meter reader drives to the Northern Westchester Joint Water Works (NWJWW) office in Cortlandt and waits while the information is slowly downloaded into the NWJWW's computer. In the winter, when the roads are bad, the meter readers estimate the readings. With the 2,100 new meters, the readings are picked up electronically by an antenna and automatically fed into the NWJWW's computer for billing purposes.

The project was divided into two phases.

Phase I installed the antenna and computer system and was supposed to replace 2,500 of the oldest meters. However, to date, 400 of the 2,500 customers have refused to let Water Department staff on their premises in order to install the new meters and the Town Board continues to "discuss" what to do about this non-compliance.

Phase II, which should have begun this year but didn't, was supposed to install the new meters in the water district's remaining 7,500 accounts.

If Phase II is never implemented, the Town will have wasted the \$850,000 it spent in Phase I to install the system's infrastructure that was designed for all 10,000 customers.

Besides fairness and generating an estimated \$100,000 a year in additional revenue by making sure that ALL water customers pay for the water they actually use, the meter replacement project will save district taxpayers money and enable them to take control of their water bills.

1. **Direct savings to customers.** Undetected leaks that continue for months at a time cost customers hundreds of dollars. The old fashioned meters are read once every four months and customers may not realize they have leaks until they receive an unusually large water bill. But because the new meters record usage on a continual basis, Water Department maintenance staff can be (and have been) dispatched to a premises to check for possible leaks as soon as the computerized system reports an unusual increase in usage.

2. **More direct savings to customers.** Water customers will be able to take control over their own water bills by monitoring their own water usage from their computers. They'll be able to see what it costs to run the washing machine or dishwasher when they're only half full or what it costs to water a lawn.

3. **And still MORE savings from efficiencies.** Over and above the additional \$100,000 in revenue generated by more accurate meters, the new system will be able to save an estimated \$150,000 a year by reducing labor costs through attrition (meter readers would be transitioned into maintenance jobs), plus eliminating the need for vehicles for meter readers and the associated expenses of gasoline, maintenance and insurance.

All of which leads one to wonder: Why is Supervisor Grace so opposed to completing the meter replacement project? Could it be that he has other plans for using the Water District's current fund balance?

Like using the \$2 million it will take to complete the meter project for the short term political advantage of saying he has reduced water district taxes?

Which option makes more sense: Investing the \$2 million so that it generates ongoing long term tax reductions — or using it for two or three years of tax relief followed by year after year of increased taxes?