

May 5, 2021 Water Information

When I was campaigning for mayor last year, even following Covid protocol I was able to spend quite a bit of time visiting with Carlton neighbors. Almost always the first topic we discussed was the size of our water bills.

I knew from two years on our city council that the odds of decreasing our water costs, or even stopping any future increases were slim to none – and I tried to make that clear as we talked – however, I did promise that I'd do everything in my power, if elected, to understand and be able to explain WHY our bills look like they do, as well as begin looking for ways to slow down the jumps in cost.

How We Got Here

After the last four months and many long conversations with city staff, I can give you a 2-word explanation for our current water rates: Deferred Maintenance.

You can find a detailed history of our water system's evolution and structure at the following link:

https://www.ci.carlton.or.us/sites/default/files/fileattachments/water_and_sewer_billing/page/561/water_and_sewer_rate_timeline.pdf

Or a short summary here:

https://www.ci.carlton.or.us/sites/default/files/fileattachments/water_and_sewer_billing/page/561/water_history_summary_final.pdf

Or see the video of the April 6, 2021 Carlton City Council meeting <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KX61S5tvVA4> starting at time 1:16:32

Basically, there was a period of about 50 years where no increases in water rates were made, but infrastructure continued to be used and deteriorate.

Eventually, we had old pipes corroding (remember the years of brown water?), in 1998 a mudslide at our reservoir cut its holding capacity in half,

and we've had a main transmission line from the reservoir to holding tanks that currently is losing close to 40% of it's the load to leakage.

Similar issues applied to our sewer system.

From 2012 to 2018, the billing structure was revised for both water and sewer, and we all felt our jaws drop as each year we saw our water/sewer rates skyrocket ... with seemingly no end in sight. (PLEASE read the Water History Summary for a more complete description.

One of the first things that new rate money went for was the replacement of the transmission line from the holding tank up Meadow Lake Road, down into Carlton – the old pipes in this section were the source of the brown water. (Mind you, these were the original water lines installed when Carlton first took over the water system in the early 1900s.)

In the last decade, staff has worked hard to find outside funding to help with the needed repairs: In 2018, then city manager Chad Olsen worked with our state legislators, and with the help of Senator Boquist and Representative Noble, the city was awarded almost \$10 million which is being used to dredge our reservoir and repair that leaking transmission line. This will go a long way to modernize and upgrade our water system, and it looks like we're closing the gap between need and funding enough that this year we were able to keep the water rate increase down to the basic Consumer Price Index and we hope to see that continue for the foreseeable future.

This Year's Costs

Now we're faced with the sewer system which is outdated, and overloaded. And that is the source of the cost increases this year. The Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) has mandated repairs and upgrades for our transfer stations and sewer lagoons that will cost an estimated \$6 million.

We can't delay – the fines for non-compliance will cost us more than getting the jobs done.

What Will We Do?

The city doesn't have \$6 million sitting in the bank and right now the only option we have is to borrow it. That's the quick and obvious solution, but it may not be the only one.

With many of the new federal assistance funding programs coming through Congress, we're working to identify federal and state grants to help pay for the upgrades. Carlton will receive a Covid-related direct payment from the federal government of slightly more than \$400,000; which will be put toward the sewer project. We've also worked out an agreement with the developers at JR Meadows for prepayment of their System Development Charges (SDCs) marked for sewer infrastructure, and that money will be applied to the project costs.

Like many of you, my household is on a fixed income and the idea of increased water and sewer bills is pretty disheartening. I hear from neighbors who have removed the lawn and other landscaping in order to conserve water use, yet still, see their bills rise. This year we're also facing drought, and concerns about a repeat of last year's wildfire season, so the odds are we'll be asked to conserve even more.

For centuries western Oregon and Washington have been unique among western states for our abundant rainfall, but this year, we're looking at the same situation that many neighboring states deal with regularly: water shortages, failing infrastructures, and not enough income.

It's not just Carlton. Most of our county neighbors are facing similar situations – especially the small cities like us, that don't have the population to distribute costs among a large customer base.

And like us, many of our neighboring cities are this year contemplating substantial water and sewer-rate increases in order to pay the costs of outdated and failing infrastructures.

There are no easy answers, BUT there is a light at the end of the tunnel...it's just going to take a while to get there.

To get an idea of what the future holds PLEASE watch the video of April 6, 2021, Carlton City Council meeting <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KX61S5tvVA4> starting at time 1:16:32

