

## **Keeping us from taking a bath in the future**

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It's quite a paradox.

At the same time that Metroplex water officials are talking about transporting water from Oklahoma and building an enormously expensive reservoir 150 miles east of Fort Worth, we're wasting water like crazy in North Texas.

Here's one prime reason for that waste: Cities such as Fort Worth have woefully outdated water billing rate structures that do little to encourage conservation.

Cities can preach water conservation all they want. But nothing gets the public's attention like a big whop to the wallet.

Fort Worth needs to foster conservation by adopting more sharply graduated rate structures that boost the cost for heavy water users.

As an example, let's look at the city's residential billing rates.

Fort Worth charges \$1.50 per 100 cubic feet for the first 4,000 cubic feet, or 29,920 gallons, of water used each month.

For consumption above that level, residents pay a modestly higher rate of \$1.72 per 100 cubic feet.

But the average resident uses only 1,290 cubic feet, or 9,649 gallons, per month - less than one-third the volume at which the higher rate kicks in.

Therefore, the higher rate is irrelevant to most residents. And even the biggest water users hardly notice it because the increase over the base rate is so modest.

Those Fort Worth residents who relentlessly irrigate huge St. Augustine lawns, frolic in their swimming pools and fill their bathtubs full don't pay appreciably higher rates than those who live in tiny homes, put in cactus-and-rock landscaping and take three-minute showers utilizing low-flow shower heads.

It's enlightening to contrast Fort Worth's residential billing structure

with that of Austin, which has a three-tiered system that significantly encourages conservation.

Austin charges \$1.25 per 1,000 gallons for the first 2,000 gallons; \$2 per 1,000 gallons for usage from 2,000 to 12,000 gallons; and \$4.90 per 1,000 gallons for usage beyond 12,000 gallons. And the city is considering implementing a new peak rate of about \$6 per 1,000 gallons.

Average monthly usage in Austin is 8,000 to 8,500 gallons, said utilities finance manager David Anders. That's about 1,100 to 1,600 gallons less than in Fort Worth.

Austin gives cash rebates to residents who save water by installing low-flush toilets, buying front-loading washers or putting in landscaping that requires minimal watering. Fort Worth has no such program.

Fort Worth's water department is generally well-run; its director, Dale Fisseler, is highly respected. But the City Council should encourage greater water conservation by adopting billing structures and incentives such as rebates to encourage conservation.

I'm particularly referring to residential rates. But city officials also should examine whether industrial rates should be changed to spur conservation.

North Texans waste water in myriad ways, from using poor outdoor watering practices to taking 30-minute showers. The Metroplex has the highest per capita water use in Texas.

Former City Councilman Bill Meadows, a Texas Water Development Board member, said Fort Worth and other North Texas communities "have got to look at strategies that will result in long-term conservation." That should include consideration of realigning water billing rates to encourage conservation, he said.

The more we conserve water, the less likely we are to have to import it from Oklahoma or build that proposed new \$1.6 billion reservoir in Northeast Texas.

At the very least, conservation can forestall the day when those costly measures are needed.

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