



SAWS seeks to save water via rates

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By Colin McDonald - Express-News

The San Antonio Water System presented a proposed rate structure to the City Council on Wednesday that would penalize high-volume users while rewarding those who use less.

“This is designed to change behavior,” said Doug Evanson, SAWS chief financial officer and senior vice president.

The utility had planned to present a new tiered system for a final vote by the council this spring that would reduce rates for 93 percent of bills. Then in the fall it would propose a rate increase for 2011 that would nullify most of the spring decrease.

The council instead asked SAWS to prepare both in June so they could be considered together this fall.

For the average San Antonio household, which uses 7,000 to 8,000 gallons of water a month, the proposed tiered structure would reduce bills by 6.3 percent, for a savings of \$2.85 a month.

SAWS projects it will need a rate increase of 6.5 percent for those same customers for its 2011 budget.

By increasing rates for the top 7 percent of all users by 13.8 percent, SAWS believes those customers will voluntarily use less — conserving 1.4 billion gallons of water a year. According to the utility, the average consumer in the top tier would see a \$20 monthly bill increase.

“You are just shifting who is paying the bill,” said District 9 Councilwoman Elisa Chan, who said although she opposes water waste, given the poor economy, rates should not be increased for any customers.

A tiered rate system is one of the most effective ways to cut water use, said Lacey McCormick, a spokeswoman for the advocacy group Texas Water Matters.

While San Antonio is a national leader in water conservation and re-use, its lack of a rate system that discourages heavy use leaves room for improvement, critics say. In a recent report, Texas Living Waters project rated San Antonio's tiered system as moderate.

"People have been asking for this for a long time, I can assure you," said Evanson of SAWS.

Because large water consumers use the most during droughts, they are driving peak demand and the need for SAWS to find new water sources, which are more expensive and raise rates for everyone, said Karen Guz, SAWS director of conservation.

Getting water from the Gulf Coast, for example, would mean building a desalination plant and pipeline at a cost of more than \$1 billion.

"In the long run, conservation for San Antonio is going to be much cheaper for everyone," McCormick said.

http://www.mysanantonio.com/livinggreensa/SAWS_seeks_to_save_water_via_rates.html

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