

Save water, pay extra: Some cry foul
Fulton, Atlanta plan rate increases; others may follow

By [D.L. BENNETT](#)

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Even utility officials concede it seems unfair to penalize customers for conserving water during the lingering drought.

Yet, Atlanta and Fulton County are asking to do just that. Both have proposed 15 percent rate increases to offset losses to conservation.

And others may well follow if usage stays low across metro Atlanta.

For water utilities the issues is simple: most have millions of dollars in outstanding bonds. A certain amount of revenue is needed to pay off those loans. And less water use means less money coming in.

Atlanta has hundreds of millions of bond debt for its Clean Water Atlanta program — a \$4.2 billion overhaul of the city's sewer and water systems.

"The problem is you want people to conserve," said Janet Ward, spokeswoman for the Department of Watershed Management. "It's the right thing to do. But ... operating budgets don't change."

Fulton public works officials will make the same case in early May to the county commission, asking for a 15 percent rate increase to offset losses to conservation.

Angela Parker, public works director, said the request is being made reluctantly, recognizing how unfair it seems.

"If there was any way to avoid it, we would," Parker said. "But we have to meet the terms of our bonds."

So far, Atlanta city council members are blocking Mayor Shirley Franklin's request for a 15 percent conservation penalty. The fee increase would apply to anyone who uses more than about 2,250 gallons of water a month. That would affect most water users since 6,000 gallon is considered standard use.

The request, proposed in February, is languishing in the city council's utilities committee and not likely to move anytime soon.

"I've got it held," said Councilwoman Carla Smith, chairwoman of the utilities committee. "I'm struggling with it."

I don't want to have to pay an extra 15 percent just because I'm conserving. It seems unfair."

Atlanta utility officials know they aren't likely to get the rate increase through a council facing an estimated \$65 million budget deficit, which likely will force service cuts and property tax hikes.

"We are preparing our [department's] budget for the next fiscal year on the assumption it will not pass," said Rob Hunter, Watershed director.

Atlanta officials plan in May to propose a series of water rate increases that will help pay for bond debt and regular operations of the huge utility. Ward said if the surcharge remains stymied, the watershed department will boost the upcoming rate increases to cover the lack of the conservation penalty.

Smith recognizes Atlanta must have the money to cover its bond debt no matter how unfair it seems to penalize folks who conserve.

"We don't really have an option to say no," Smith said.

Fulton commissioners will face the same choice next month.