



# DeKalb County Government

Manuel J. Maloof Center  
1300 Commerce Drive  
Decatur, Georgia 30030

## Agenda Item

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**File #:** 2025-1525

Substitute

6/9/2026

**File Status:**

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**Public Hearing:** YES  NO

**Department:** Board of Commissioners - District 6

**SUBJECT:**

**Commission District(s):** All Commission Districts

An Ordinance to Amend The Code of DeKalb County, Georgia Chapter 25 Pertaining To Water, Sewers and Sewage Disposal And For Other Purposes.

**Information Contact:** Commissioner Edward C. "Ted" Terry

**Phone Number:** 404-371-4909

**PURPOSE:**

An ordinance to amend the code of DeKalb County, Georgia Chapter 25 pertaining to water, sewers and sewage disposal. This includes the creation of a means-tested water bill debt forgiveness program for income-qualified customers and the creation of a "Customer Bill of Rights" for Watershed Management customers.

**NEED/IMPACT:**

On February 25, 2025, the DeKalb County Board of Commissioners voted to approve a "10% Rate Increase No Earlier Than May 1 for the Year 2025, and Nine Additional Increases in the Amount of 10% Each , Which Shall Become Effective on Each January 1, Beginning January 1, 2026 Through and Including January 1, 2034" and a "Resolution of the Board of Commissioners of DeKalb County Supporting Policy Changes to Protect Seniors, Disabled Individuals, and Low-Income Residents Against Upcoming Water Rate Increases," confirming their commitment to fair, compassionate, and fiscally responsible water policies that prioritize dignity, public health, and economic stability. On August 12, 2025, The Board of Commissioners approved "A Resolution Requesting The Implementation Of A Means-Tested Water Bill Amnesty Program For Income-Qualified Customers And Requesting A Targeted Review Of Uncollectible Debt In Blighted Condominium Communities." This ordinance establishes the Water Bill Forgiveness Program as well as The DeKalb County Water Customer Bill of Rights, clearly outlining what all DeKalb County water customers are entitled to under policies established by the Board of Commissioners and supported by the Water Rate Assistance Program (WRAP) and the Office of Water Customer Advocate (OWCA).

**FISCAL IMPACT:**

Unknown at this time.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

To approve the ordinance and authorize the Chief Executive Officer or her designee to execute all necessary documents....

**AN ORDINANCE TO AMEND THE CODE OF DEKALB COUNTY, GEORGIA CHAPTER 25  
PERTAINING TO WATER, SEWERS AND SEWAGE DISPOSAL AND FOR OTHER  
PURPOSES.**

**WHEREAS**, DeKalb County is currently faced with over \$104 million in unpaid water utility bills, affecting more than 90,000 residential accounts—nearly half of the County’s customer base; and

**WHEREAS**, this significant level of delinquency is rooted not solely in customer non-payment, but in years of systemic billing failures, inaccurate meter readings, disputed charges, and inadequate customer service infrastructure; and

**WHEREAS**, many customers with delinquent accounts have made partial payments over time, and the absence of billing clarity, meter accuracy, and customer advocacy has significantly eroded public confidence in the water billing system; and

**WHEREAS**, O.C.G.A. 36-1-26 gives DeKalb County the express authority on how it collects water debt. See *Bowery Savings Bank v. DeKalb* (holding that liens and enforcement of water debt comes from local police power); and

**WHEREAS**, structured water utility debt forgiveness programs implemented in other jurisdictions—including the City of Chicago, Philadelphia, PA, Baltimore, MD—have demonstrated strong outcomes in revenue recovery, reduced shutoffs, and long-term payment compliance; and

**WHEREAS**, the DeKalb County Board of Commissioners has previously approved a new income-based customer affordability program designed to assist low-income residents with water affordability beginning July 1, 2025; and

**WHEREAS**, on February 25, 2025, the DeKalb County Board of Commissioners voted to approve a “Resolution of the Board of Commissioners of DeKalb County Supporting Policy Changes to Protect Seniors, Disabled Individuals, and Low-Income Residents Against Upcoming Water Rate Increases,” confirming their commitment to fair, compassionate, and fiscally responsible water policies that prioritize dignity, public health, and economic stability; and

**WHEREAS**, pairing the launch of the discount program with a complementary amnesty program will help restore trust, reduce barriers to payment, and support financial stability for both customers and the utility.

**NOW THEREFORE, BE IT ORDAINED** by the Governing Authority of DeKalb County, Georgia, and be it hereby ordained by the Authority of same, that SECTION 25-279 of the Code of DeKalb County, Georgia, as Revised 1998, is hereby amended to add the following:

By amending Chapter 25-279 of the Code of DeKalb County, as Revised 1988, to add a new article with reserved sections and new sections 25-280 through 25- 285 as follows:

**Section 25-280. Purpose and findings.**

- (a) The governing authority finds that there is a need to establish a debt forgiveness program to help low-income DeKalb residents from accumulating financial debt due to the increased water and sewer billing rates.
- (b) The governing authority finds that there is a need to restrict the County's ability to collect certain water and sewer debt for low-income customers.
- (c) The governing authority finds that there is a need to establish a customer bill of rights for DeKalb watershed management customers to ensure clear, timely and accurate bills based on functioning meters and verified readings to eliminate errors and unpredictable costs.

**Section 25-281. Definitions**

Customer - Customer means a natural person who (i) is receiving or (ii) is in the process of requesting or simultaneously requests to receive or restore service from the Department of Watershed Management at such person's primary residence in DeKalb County, Georgia. A person shall cease to qualify as a customer under the second category if his or her application for service is ultimately denied.

WRAP - means the Income-Based Water Rate Assistance Program.

Monthly household income - means the monthly income received by the customer and all adults residing in the customer's household.

Low-Income household- Any household that monthly household income that is at or below 60% of the Area Median Income as determined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

Special Hardship - may include, but is not limited to, the following conditions: (i) the addition of a dependent; (ii) a seriously ill household member; or (iii) circumstances that threaten the household's access to the necessities of life if payment of a delinquent bill is required.

Timely Payment - Timely payment shall be payment postmarked or received within one month of that payment's due date.

**Section 25-282. Water Bill Debt Forgiveness Program:**

In conjunction with the income-based customer discount program entitled the Water Rate Assistance Program (WRAP), DeKalb County shall establish a water debt forgiveness program. The water bill debt forgiveness program shall include:

1. A debt forgiveness structure that offers full debt relief of past due balances in exchange for consistent, timely payments over a defined 2-year program period for those customers enrolled in the WRAP program;
2. Timely payment of a customer's monthly WRAP bill shall satisfy all of a customer's current water liabilities, so that there is no addition to the customer's arrears after the defined 2-year program. Each

timely payment of a customer's WRAP bill shall reduce their current water liabilities and reduce the balance of his or her arrears by 1/24th until there is no longer a balance of the customer's arrears.

3. Eligibility of the debt forgiveness program shall be based on the same income thresholds as currently upheld by the WRAP program;

4. To ensure maximum participation, the County shall only look at a customer's monthly household income in determining program eligibility, the County shall not look at a customer's usage rate to determine program eligibility.

5. Customers who are enrolled in WRAP shall be required to make no additional payment in respect to any pre-WRAP arrears to maintain service.

### **Section 25-283 Water Rate Assistance Program:**

The Water Rate Assistance Program helps eligible low-income DeKalb households manage water and sewer bills by capping costs at 4.5% of their annual household income. To ensure maximum participation DeKalb County shall:

1. Be permitted to only look at a customer's monthly household income in determining program eligibility, the County shall not look at a customer's usage rate to determine WRAP eligibility.

2. The County shall not be allowed to require low-income DeKalb households to sign up for a payment plan before they are able to enroll into the WRAP program.

### **Section 25-284 Water Debt Collection:**

1. Given that many DeKalb customers are struggling with older water debt, DeKalb County shall not collect any water or sewer debt for any residential customers more than 4 years old from the date of last payment or default.

2. This Section amends Sec. 2-705 to include that DeKalb County shall not place liens on any low-income residential customers or any commercial customers who are currently enrolled in a payment plan and have not defaulted on their payment plan.

### **Section 25-285. DeKalb Watershed Management Customer Bill of Rights:**

#### **1. Fair & Accurate Billing**

- All DeKalb Watershed Management (DWM) customers are entitled to the right to clear, timely, and accurate bills based on functioning meters and verified readings.
- The right to dispute charges and receive an independent review by the Office Water Customer Advocate (OWCA).

#### **2. Access to WRAP (Water Rate Assistance Program)**

- All DWM customers are entitled to the right to affordable water through income-based billing assistance.
- The right to participate in the County's means-tested debt forgiveness options, with full relief on past-due balances in exchange for consistent on-time payments.

### **3. Protection from Shutoffs**

- All DWM customers have the right to uninterrupted water service while WRAP eligibility is under review.
- The right to protections for households in distressed or blighted communities under special review.
- Enhanced protections for seniors age 62 and up who are enrolled in WRAP, families with children under the age of 18 who are enrolled in WRAP, and residents with disabilities. This includes shutoff protections for 6 months after the last payment was made.

### **4. Independent Customer Advocacy**

- All DWM customers - including commercial accounts - have the right to independent representation through the Office of Water Customer Advocate (OWCA).
- The right to have systemic issues, billing disputes, and customer complaints reviewed and resolved by the OWCA.
- The OWCA must publish regular reports on findings, trends, and progress.

### **5. Community Representation & Oversight**

- All DWM customers have the right to be represented by the Watershed Customer Service & Billing Advisory Group, a citizen-led oversight body.
- The Watershed Customer Service & Billing Advisory Group shall review OWCA reports, billing practices, and major watershed initiatives to ensure accountability.

### **6. Transparency & Accountability**

- All DWM customers have the right to clear public communication on billing policies, WRAP benefits, debt forgiveness programs, and customer protections.
- The right to accessible reporting on program outcomes, fiscal impacts, and ongoing improvements.

### **7. Equity & Compassion**

- DeKalb County affirms that water is a human right.
- All DeKalb residents have the right to fair, compassionate, and fiscally responsible water policies that prioritize dignity, public health, and economic stability.

**ADOPTED** by the DeKalb County Board of Commissioners, this \_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, 2026.

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**CHAKIRA JOHNSON**  
Presiding Officer  
Board of Commissioners  
DeKalb County, Georgia

**APPROVED** by the Chief Executive Officer of DeKalb County, this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, 2026.

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**LORRAINE COCHRAN-JOHNSON**  
Chief Executive Officer  
DeKalb County, Georgia

**ATTEST:**

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**BARBARA H. SANDERS-NORWOOD, CCC**  
Clerk to the Board of Commissioners and  
Chief Executive Officer

**APPROVED AS TO SUBSTANCE:**

**APPROVED AS TO FORM:**

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**ZACHARY WILLIAMS**  
Chief Operating Officer  
DeKalb County, Georgia

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**TERRY G. PHILLIPS**  
Interim County Attorney  
DeKalb County, Georgia