



DeKalb County Government

Agenda Item

File ID: 2024 -1357

Substitute

2/25/2025

Public Hearing: YES NO

Department: Board of Commissioner - District 2

SUBJECT:

Commission District(s): All Districts

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

Information Contact: Commissioner Michelle Long Spears

Phone Number: 404-371-2863

PURPOSE:

To approve the 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.

NEED/IMPACT:

DeKalb County Board of Commissioners acknowledges the necessity of raising water rates to address aging infrastructure and years of deferred maintenance, which have led to increased operational costs and the need for significant investment in repairs and upgrades. The aging water infrastructure poses risks to water quality and reliability, necessitating immediate attention to ensure the safety and health of the community. The Board recognizes that while these rate increases are critical for long-term sustainability and reliability of water services, they can disproportionately impact vulnerable populations, including seniors, individuals with disabilities, and low-income families. The DeKalb County Board of Commissioners supports policy changes in the attached resolution to protect seniors, disabled individuals, and low-income residents from the impact of upcoming water rate increases and commits to advocating for the implementation of these policies to ensure that all residents, particularly the most vulnerable, have access to affordable water services while addressing the pressing need for infrastructure improvements.

FISCAL IMPACT:

TBD

RECOMMENDATION:

To approve the 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 and authorize the Chief Executive Officer to execute all necessary documents.

**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 AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES**

WHEREAS, the DeKalb County Board of Commissioners acknowledges its responsibility for raising sufficient revenues to support the water and sewer utility through adoption of rates, pursuant to Section 9 of the DeKalb County Organizational Act; and,

WHEREAS, amendments to the Water and Sewer Rate Structure offers the financial capacity to address aging infrastructure and years of deferred maintenance, which have led to increased operational costs and the need for significant investment in repairs and upgrades; and,

WHEREAS, the aging water infrastructure poses risks to water quality and reliability, necessitating immediate attention to ensure the safety and health of the community; and,

WHEREAS, to enable the continued implementation of the Department of Watershed Management's Water and Wastewater Master Plan, including necessary maintenance, repair, expansion and upgrades to the existing System and continued compliance with the Modified Consent Decree with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, as it currently exists or as it may be hereafter amended, increased System revenues will be required; and

WHEREAS, the Board recognizes that while rate increases are critical for long-term sustainability and reliability of water services, they can disproportionately impact vulnerable populations, including seniors, individuals with disabilities, and low-income families; and,

WHEREAS, the Board of Commissioners believes that access to clean and affordable water is a fundamental human right essential for the health and well-being of all residents; and,

WHEREAS, many seniors and disabled individuals often live on fixed incomes, making it challenging to absorb additional costs associated with essential services like water; and,

WHEREAS, low-income residents may already face financial hardships that could be exacerbated by increased utility costs, potentially leading to detrimental effects on their health and quality of life; and,

WHEREAS, efficient consumption of precious water resources and the equitable allocation of costs to users for the water and sewer components of the system is best achieved through the rate structure applied to an accurate reflection of actual use through DeKalb's metering system; and,

WHEREAS, the DeKalb County Board of Commissioners is committed to fostering an inclusive community where all residents have access to essential services, including clean and affordable water, without financial hardship, thereby promoting water equity for all; and,

WHEREAS, it is essential to align water rate increases with policy priorities that mitigate

their impact on the most vulnerable populations; and,

WHEREAS, the rate structure also offers the capacity to address important policy goals, including but not limited to:

- Ensuring rates are affordable to ratepayers,
- Providing utility services affordable to qualified low-income residents who cannot afford prevailing rates,
- Ensuring that component rates for both water and sewer are set to avoid cross-subsidy from one utility to another,
- Ensuring that consumers pay only for the services they use; and,

WHEREAS, effective policy solutions implemented in other cities, such as Baltimore, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Austin, provide a framework for addressing water affordability and access; and,

WHEREAS, implementing policies that address water affordability will financially benefit DeKalb County. Studies show that affordable utility bills lead to higher and more consistent payment rates, enabling easier revenue collection and decreasing expenses related to shutoff and late payment notices; and,

WHEREAS, under DeKalb County’s Organizational Act, it is essential that the Board of Commissioners’ policy priorities be enacted through the rate structure rather than administrative policies, grant programs, or other actions beyond the authority of the Board of Commissioners.

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the Board of Commissioners of DeKalb County, Georgia, request the Administration to take specific actions, as follows:

- (1) Establishment the Office of Water and Sewer Customer Advocacy (“OWSCA”) within DeKalb County Government by January 1, 2026, to work in concert with the current Watershed Customer Service and Billing Advisory Board (“WCSBAB”) to address customer billing issues and to make any necessary amendments to the WCSBAB’s enabling legislation;
- (2) Utilization of Department of Watershed Management Enterprise resources to fund the DeKalb C.A.R.E.S. Discount Program, including an income-based water affordability plan, for very low income and extremely low income as defined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development will be brought forward within thirty (30) days of the adoption of this Resolution;
- (3) Establishment of water shutoff protections for vulnerable populations, including households with minors under 18 years old, seniors 62 years of age or older, disabled residents, and those experiencing temporary hardships and including commitments (a) to not shut off water service to any customer who is currently in the dispute process or who is placed in the forthcoming OWSCA process as long as they continue to pay all undisputed charges when due, (b) to ensure customers have continued access to the County’s dispute process as it now exists or may exist in the future, and (c) to develop a process to allow customers who have completed the current dispute process but are still unsatisfied with the result to enter into the forthcoming OWSCA process;

- (4) Re-establishment of a seven (7) year payment plan option for customers currently in the dispute process on the date this Resolution is adopted and approved by the Governing Authority while the OWSCA is being established;
- (5) Completion of an operational audit of the Department of Watershed Management by January 31, 2026;
- (6) Implementation of a master planning process for the Pole Bridge Wastewater Treatment Facility, to include brownfield remediation and sustainability goals; and,
- (7) Creation of protocols for future rate structures that will: (A) recognize the differential between water and sewer rates and consumption by various users to ensure customers pay only for services they receive, (B) require future water and sewer rates will, in the aggregate, support the operation, maintenance, and expansion of the water and sanitary sewer systems separately, such that water rates support maintenance, operation and expansion of the water system and sanitary sewer rates support maintenance, operation and expansion of the sanitary sewer system, (C) conduct a thorough assessment to evaluate the potential impact on vulnerable populations and seek public input to inform decisions prior to any rate increases not contemplated by this resolution, (D) increase outreach efforts to educate residents about water conservation and available assistance programs to help them manage their water usage and costs; and, (E) establish a requirement for at least five (5) public hearings to be held throughout the County with the minutes of each such public hearing to be published on the County's website prior to any rate increases not contemplated by this resolution.

ADOPTED by the DeKalb County Board of Commissioners, this __ day of _____, 2025.

MICHELLE LONG SPEARS
Presiding Officer
Board of Commissioners
DeKalb County, Georgia

APPROVED by the Chief Executive Officer of DeKalb County, this _____ day of _____, 2025.

LORRAINE COCHRAN-JOHNSON
Chief Executive Officer
DeKalb County, Georgia

ATTEST:

BARABRA SANDERS-NORWOOD, CCC
Clerk Board of Commissioners and Chief Executive Officer
DeKalb County, Georgia

APPROVED AS TO FORM:

APPROVED AS TO SUBSTANCE:

VIVIANE H. ERNSTES
County Attorney
DeKalb County, Georgia

ZACHARY L. WILLIAMS
Chief Operating Officer
DeKalb County, Georgia