



DeKalb County Government

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

Agenda Item

File #: 2025-0814

Substitute Item

8/12/2025

File Status:

Public Hearing: YES ☐ NO ☒

Department: Board of Commissioners - District 6

SUBJECT:

Commission District(s): All Commission Districts

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

Information Contact: Commissioner Edward C. “Ted” Terry

Phone Number: 404-371-4909

PURPOSE:

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.

NEED/IMPACT:

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. 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. Structured water utility amnesty programs implemented in other jurisdictions—including the City of Chicago and New York City—have demonstrated strong outcomes in revenue recovery, reduced shutoffs, and long-term payment compliance. 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.

FISCAL IMPACT:

Unknown at this time.

RECOMMENDATION:

To approve the resolution and authorize the chief executive officer or her designee to execute all necessary documents.

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

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, more than \$40 million of this unpaid debt is tied to multifamily properties such as apartments and aging condominiums, many of which are master-metered and lack functioning homeowners associations or viable collection structures; and

WHEREAS, blighted communities such as Whitehall Forest and Brannon Hill, each owing more than \$3 million in unpaid water bills, suffer from severe infrastructure decline, violent crime, and ungovernable housing conditions, and represent unique cases of systemic collapse beyond the reach of traditional collections or enforcement; 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, structured water utility amnesty programs implemented in other jurisdictions—including the City of Chicago and New York City—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 discount program designed to assist low-income residents with water affordability beginning July 1, 2025; 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 RESOLVED, by the DeKalb County Board of Commissioners, and it is hereby resolved by the authority of the same, as follows:

SECTION 1.

The DeKalb County Board of Commissioners hereby strongly encourages the Finance Department to develop and implement a Water Bill Amnesty Program for income-qualified residential customers, to begin no later than July 1, 2025, in conjunction with the income-based customer discount program. The program shall include:

1. A tiered debt forgiveness structure that offers partial or full relief of past due balances in exchange for consistent, on-time payment over a defined program period;
2. Eligibility based on the same income thresholds as the forthcoming customer discount program;
3. Clear communication and outreach to ensure eligible households understand the terms, benefits, and requirements of the program.

SECTION 2.

The Finance Department shall present a detailed implementation plan, including administrative structure, estimated fiscal impact, and outreach strategies, to the Board of Commissioners no later than June 30, 2025.

SECTION 3.

The Board of Commissioners further requests the DeKalb County Law Department, in coordination with the Finance Department, to conduct a legal and policy review of uncollectible debt held by severely distressed and blighted condominium properties, including but not limited to Whitehall Forest and Brannon Hill.

SECTION 4.

Said review shall include an analysis of the feasibility and legality of writing off such debt in accordance with state law and accounting standards, and a recommended framework for classifying “unrecoverable” accounts based on public safety, infrastructure decay, and governance failure.

SECTION 5.

No customer currently under evaluation for amnesty program eligibility or residing in a property subject to the blight review outlined in Section 3 shall be subject to water disconnection due to past-due balances during the pendency of the review period.

SECTION 6.

The Board of Commissioners affirms its commitment to rebuilding trust, promoting fairness, and supporting vulnerable residents through compassionate, data-informed, and fiscally responsible utility policy.

ADOPTED this ____ day of _____, 20__ by the DeKalb County Board of Commissioners.

Michelle Long Spears
Presiding Officer
Board of Commissioners
DeKalb County, Georgia

APPROVED by the Chief Executive Officer, this _____ day of _____, 20

Lorraine Cochran-Johnson
Chief Executive Officer
DeKalb County, Georgia

ATTEST:

APPROVED AS TO FORM:

Barbara Sanders
County Clerk
Board of Commissioners and
Chief Executive Officer

Matthew Welch
Acting County Attorney
DeKalb County, Georgia

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 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, more than \$40 million of this unpaid debt is tied to multifamily properties such as apartments and aging condominiums, many of which are master-metered and lack functioning homeowners associations or viable collection structures; and

WHEREAS, some blighted may suffer from severe infrastructure decline, violent crime, and ungovernable housing conditions, and represent unique cases of systemic collapse beyond the reach of traditional collections or enforcement; 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, structured water utility amnesty programs implemented in other jurisdictions—including the City of Chicago and New York City—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 discount program designed to assist low-income residents with water affordability beginning in August 2025; 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 RESOLVED, by the DeKalb County Board of Commissioners, and it is hereby resolved by the authority of the same, as follows:

SECTION 1.

The DeKalb County Board of Commissioners hereby strongly encourages the Finance Department and the DeKalb County Water and Sewer Customer Advocate (“Advocate”) to jointly develop and implement a Water Bill Amnesty Program (“Amnesty Program”) for income-qualified residential customers as a part of Phase I/II of the Advocate’s engagement and to begin no later than September 2, 2025, in conjunction with the income-based customer discount program.

The program shall include:

1. A tiered debt forgiveness structure that offers partial or full relief of past due balances in exchange for consistent, on-time payment over a defined period;

2. Eligibility based on the same income thresholds as the forthcoming customer discount program;
3. Clear communication and outreach to ensure all potentially eligible households are aware of the program and understand the terms, benefits, and requirements of the Amnesty Program.

In developing the Amnesty Program's parameters, the following shall also be considered:

1. How to best address delinquencies in accounts tied to multi-family properties such as apartments and aging condominiums with multiple owners and varying ownership structures;
2. How to best address delinquencies in accounts tied to single family residences and whether to include single family residences held by corporate or other entities;
3. An appropriate time frame or potential sunset for the Program or certain portions of the Program.

SECTION 2.

The Finance Department or the Advocate shall present a detailed implementation plan, including administrative structure, estimated fiscal impact, and outreach strategies, to the Board of Commissioners no later than August 26, 2025.

SECTION 3.

The Board of Commissioners further requests the DeKalb County Law Department, in coordination with the Finance Department, to conduct a legal and policy review of uncollectible debt held by severely distressed and blighted condominium properties.

SECTION 4.

Said review shall include an analysis of the feasibility and legality of writing off such debt in accordance with state law and accounting standards, and a recommended framework for classifying "unrecoverable" accounts based on public safety, infrastructure decay, and governance failure.

SECTION 5.

No customer currently under evaluation for amnesty program eligibility or residing in a property subject to the blight review outlined in Section 3 shall be subject to water disconnection due to past-due balances during the pendency of the review period.

SECTION 6.

The Board of Commissioners affirms its commitment to rebuilding trust, promoting fairness, and supporting vulnerable residents through compassionate, data-informed, and fiscally responsible utility policy.

ADOPTED this ____ day of _____, 20__ by the DeKalb County Board of Commissioners.

Michelle Long Spears
Presiding Officer
Board of Commissioners
DeKalb County, Georgia

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

Lorraine Cochran-Johnson
Chief Executive Officer
DeKalb County, Georgia

ATTEST:

APPROVED AS TO FORM:

Barbara Sanders-Norwood
County Clerk
Board of Commissioners and
Georgia Chief Executive Officer

William J. Linkous
County Attorney
DeKalb County,