

At Harrisburg's water-sewer outfit, the grownups have taken charge: Editorial



Shannon Williams, CEO of Capital Region Water, announces new initiatives with Marc Kurowski, board chairman. (Barbara Miller)



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If you're a customer of Harrisburg water and sewer service, the good news is that the days when the utility was the dysfunctional plaything of politicians are over, and highly professional grownups are now in charge.

Doing everything the water and sewer system needs won't be cheap.

The bad news?

Because much of the system is aging and suffering from years of managerial indifference and neglect, your water and sewer bills are going to go up. And up. And up.

The water/sewer utility, formerly known as The Harrisburg Authority (a.k.a. "Steve Reed's favorite plaything"), was spun off from city ownership as part of the city's financial recovery plan.

To emphasize the break with the municipal authority's politically mismanaged past, it has been renamed Capital Region Water.

Big changes coming

CEO Shannon Williams told the media Tuesday about the utility's ambitious plans to improve customer service and its deteriorating facilities, some of which are more than 100 years old.

The most immediate big-ticket item is a \$50 million upgrade to the sewage treatment plant. It will do a better job removing nitrogen and ammonia pollutants, a key contribution to the long-running cleanup of Chesapeake Bay.

New management is also tackling the problem that produced a deluge of customer complaints – badly estimated water bills.

The problem arose when the batteries powering customers' electronic meter readers ran out, as batteries are wont to do. The utility had no systematic plan for replacing them and couldn't afford to go back to manually reading all those meters. Instead of charging for actual use, estimated bills were issued, often for hundreds of dollars more than customers expected to pay.

Some 6,000 customers were getting estimated bills when the authority left city control; that number is now down to 1,200. For customers hit with painfully high bills, the utility is still offering no-interest payment plans.

Williams said the utility will convert to a brand new billing system, instead of having the city handle bills and payments. She warned customers to expect some glitches.

Street sweeping may end

Capital Region Water currently pays the city to do street sweeping, to help keep debris from clogging the storm sewer system. Williams said Tuesday the utility is reviewing whether the sweeping is even necessary (periodically cleaning sewer lines might be cheaper) and if so, who will do the work.

Williams said her operation is responsible for 135 miles of pipe, 4,000 storm drains and more than 3,000 manhole covers. "There was no single person dedicated to their operation and maintenance — until now," she said.

Crews have begun cleaning and fixing storm drains, some of which were so clogged they had trees growing out of them. The work is made easier, thanks to a fancy drain-vacuuming truck that sucks up sludge.

Crews are also using high-tech equipment to survey those 135 miles of pipe, trying to find problems before the lines break. However, Williams noted that for now, the utility is still in triage mode, reacting to failures, rather than taking action to prevent them.

For the longer term, the utility aims to reduce the nasty sewer overflows that happen when a big storm hits and rainwater runoff overwhelms the system. A key strategy will be installing green infrastructure, like drainage swales and roofs with vegetation to absorb water before it gets into the drainage system.

Rate increases loom

Doing everything the water and sewer system needs won't be cheap.

"There will definitely be rate increases into the future," Williams told the media Tuesday. How much, she couldn't say, because "we don't know what's out there yet" in the way of work to be done. The goal, she said, is to make the rate increases as "even and gradual ... as possible."

It's unfortunate that the bills are now coming due for deferred maintenance and past political exploitation of Harrisburg's water and sewer system, but it's an unavoidable part of the city's recovery.

On the plus side, Harrisburg has a secure, long-term source of clean drinking water at DeHart reservoir in Clarks Valley, in the mountains to the northeast. Harrisburg's water recently won a top-five award in a national taste test.

With the city's debt restructured and new leadership at city hall, Harrisburg residents had new hope that those in charge would be able to fix what's broken in basic services.

So far, it looks as if the folks at Capital Region Water are doing their part.