

ROUND ROCK

Round Rock considers water conservation plan

Ordinance would increase rates for biggest users, educate residents on need to conserve.

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The City of Round Rock is again looking to get residents to conserve water by increasing rates for high usage during summer months, but this time officials also are focusing on educating people about the need for conservation.

The City Council last week gave preliminary approval to an ordinance that would boost rates for only the biggest users and would step up conservation efforts citywide. The council is expected to take it up again Dec. 18. If approved, the ordinance would go into effect Jan. 1, and the conservation rates would be in effect from May through September, Utilities Director Michael Thane said.

"If we can reduce outdoor watering, that helps offset future water rate increases and pushes off expansions to the system," Thane said. "That's why the whole conservation plan is important. As more and more people move here, water will become more precious. We need to educate people on why it's important to change their watering habits and to conserve."

Beginning Jan. 1, all water customers will pay a base rate of \$13.18 plus \$2.24 for every 1,000 gallons of water used. The council in September approved the increase from \$2.13 to pay off debt for expanding the city's water system, Thane said.

Under the new rates, the average customer using about 15,000 gallons a month between May and September would have a bill of about \$47, Thane said.

If the conservation plan is approved, customers would pay \$2.80 per gallon for every 1,000 gallons above 18,000 during peak months.

About 20 percent of residents use more than 18,000 gallons a month during the summer, Thane said.

A resident who uses 20,000 gallons a month in the summer would have a bill of \$59.10, Thane said. Using 30,000 gallons during those months would cost \$87.10, he said.

"We're not worried about normal usage," Thane said. "We're worried about discretionary usage."

A similar water conservation measure was rejected in May, with some council members saying that a slight increase wouldn't encourage residents to cut back and that enough was not done to promote conservation.

The new plan calls for the city to hire a water conservation specialist who would give talks to schools and other groups about conservation, Thane said. That person would also perform water audits for residents, going to individual homes and looking at irrigation systems or how they water to provide information on how people can use less, Thane said.

The city would also begin looking at changing the residential watering schedule from the current suggestion of once every five days, Thane said. The city could also begin developing public service announcements and making sure water meters are calibrated correctly, he said.

The city is not in danger of running out of water, officials say. But a growing population will increase demand in the future. The city is working to expand the capacity of a water plant at Interstate 35 and Westinghouse Road and is negotiating with Cedar Park and Leander on a joint plant.

"I think there's no way to argue against water conservation," Council Member George White said. "It's a precious commodity in Central Texas, and one of the issues I ran on was assuring long-term water availability."

White, who was elected to the council in May, had spoken out against the initial rate increase plan because it lacked an education component, he said.

"I think it's a good program that'll work for us," White said of the current plan. "It's got the two essential elements, but there's still a lot of work to be done."

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