

Smart Water Meters Take Root in Texas Cities

by John Wayne Ferguson, August 6, 2012



Photo by: Sarah Lim

ROUND ROCK — Early one recent morning, Buddy Franklin and a team of utility workers descended on the Rock Hollow neighborhood in this Austin suburb. They went from house to house with one mission: to install new electronic water meters that change how the city records, and bills for, water use.

“They won’t see another meter reader for a long time,” Franklin said as his team dug through loose dirt at the homes to replace the old meters.

Similar scenes are playing out across Texas. The installation of electronic water meters is meant to cut costs and save water. The effort reflects a similar change in the way electricity use is increasingly being measured, with smart electric readers.

But the electric meter changes, urged by the state’s Public Utility Commission, have been more sweeping. More than 5.5 million smart meters have been installed across Texas, bolstered by a 2007 law directing that such meters “be deployed as rapidly as possible to allow customers to better manage energy use and control costs,” and by federal grants aimed at creating a smart grid.

No such law or incentives exist for water meters, said Russell Hamilton, the executive director of the Texas Water Utilities Association, which helps utilities improve services. Still, by the end of 2010, more than 3.5 million new meters had been installed, says the Texas Water Development Board.

Utility officials across the state say they have encountered little opposition to the new meters.

“Generally, we’re not hearing a lot from the public,” said John Norman, the meter services manager in Arlington, which is installing 17,000 water meters through a pilot project. Complaints came mostly after the meters were installed and returned higher bills, Norman said, but his department and others said that was generally a corrective change because older meters tended to slow down over time.

The transition to automatic meters will save money, officials say, because meter readers will no longer have to go from yard to yard. Automatic meters have transmitters that send signals to a collection hub.

The new meters also make it easier to detect leaks, because a utility can see whether a household is using large amounts of water in the dead of night, when few people would normally use it.

But the new meters are not always accompanied by new billing systems that allow residents to view their water use in real time — these can be potentially costly. Pflugerville, which finished installing 13,000 meters in 2009, still provides the data in monthly paper statements.

Having access to water-use data is helpful only if it is used to change habits, said Ronald Kaiser, a professor of water policy at Texas A&M University.

Kaiser said that when utility companies fixate on overhead savings, the biggest benefit — helping customers save water and money — is missed. Without accessible data, the customers are in almost the same situation they were in before the switch.

“The ultimate question ought to be,” he said, “can they manage water more efficiently?”

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