

COLUMBUS COUNTY
CUSTOMER SERVICE POLICY
UTILITIES COLLECTION DEPARTMENT

A. SERVICE APPLICATION

Residential Accounts

Columbus County requires a completed Application for Service (attached), signature and deposit to start water service. With the application, we will need a copy of your Driver's License or state issued ID, payment of \$50.00 for property owner and \$100.00 for renter's deposit, and copy of lease/purchase agreement or form entitled Property Owner/Landlord Transfer of Responsibility for Account Charges. Also, please fill out the part on the application that indicates whether you are owner of the house or renter. You will need to speak with one of our customer service representatives to obtain the deposit amount required with your application. Our customer service representatives are available via telephone from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday, at 910-642-5257.

Same day service for existing customers can be done as long you stop by our office prior to 2:00 PM, Monday through Friday. Otherwise, the service may be provided the following business day.

If the owner/resident has a meter (County owned equipment) located inside a locked fence/gate the owner/resident must provide a key to the Public Utilities Department for entry. The owner/resident is required to ensure the work area around the meter/water line is safe for workers to perform their duties and shall not block or impede access to the meter/water line. If the meter/water line is inaccessible to workers in the Public Utilities Department, services may be discontinued.

The security deposit is non-transferable and shall be non-interest bearing.

The deposit will be applied to the final bill when the account is closed. Customers who have multiple accounts (apartment complexes, etc.) are required to maintain a deposit equal to the deposit outlined in the adopted budget. Customers who have multiple accounts and are renting the property are required to pay an additional security deposit.

If the customer disconnects one account to relocate to another account within the County, the security deposit will be transferred to the new account when all previous balances at the former account are paid in full. Otherwise, the customer will be required to pay an additional security deposit on the new account. If the customer relocates without notification to the Public Utilities staff, leaving a balance on their account, then the balance on the previous account can / will be transferred to the current account and will be required to pay in full at the time of the new account being established.

The customer shall receive a final bill reflecting the total amount owed to Columbus County for said account.

Upon notification of the death of the customer/account holder, services will be disconnected within ten (10) days of the date of said notice. If a family member (next of kin) or the Personal Representative of the customer/account holder's estate provides a death certificate along with one of the following: Letters Testamentary, Letters of Administration, Affidavit of Collection, or (if no estate has been opened), a letter from the family member stating that the letter-writer is an heir of the estate and is authorized to transfer water service into his/her name, then the account can be reopened in his/her name by following all requirements of the "Residential Service" policy mentioned above. Deceased customer's security deposit or credit balance is refunded to their estate through the Clerk of Court.

Commercial/ Industrial / Institutional Accounts

Columbus County requires a completed Application for Service (application), signature, security deposit and a copy of the rental agreement (if applicable) to start water service. Application for Service for all commercial, industrial, and institutional accounts must also be approved by the Planning Department.

The security deposit is non-transferable and shall be non-interest bearing.

Upon notification of the death of the owner/representative, services will be disconnected within ten (10) days of the date of said notice. If a corporate member (next of kin) or the Personal Representative of the customer/account holder's estate provides a death certificate along with one of the following: Letters Testamentary, Letters of Administration, Affidavit of Collection, or (if no estate has been opened), a letter from the family member stating that the letter-writer is an heir of the estate and is authorized to transfer water service into his/her name, then the account can be reopened in his/her name by following all requirements of the policy for the "Application for Service" for commercial, industrial, and institutional accounts. Deceased customer's security deposit or credit balance is refunded to their estate through the Clerk of Court.

B. ACCOUNT BILLING

Columbus County shall ensure that all customer's meters are read in a manner which provides the County with the most efficient use for personnel. Each customer shall be billed for water usage during a specified billing period, along with all other applicable fees and charges.

1. UTILITY PAYMENT SCHEDULE REVISED

In order to serve customers better and to have a clearer payment schedule, Columbus County is updating its Utility Payment Schedule/Policy. The changes are as follows:

- The billing date for Columbus County's utility bill will be mailed by the 8th of each month following the billing month(s). The customer understands and agrees that the

County shall not be liable for the delivery of the mail through the United States Postal Service (USPS). If the customer does not receive his or her bill within a reasonable period of time it shall be the responsibility of the customer to contact the Columbus County Utilities Collection Department to acquire a current account balance due to Columbus County, at which time the customer shall make payment in full.

- Bills will now be due upon receipt. If payment is not received by the beginning of business (8:30 a.m.) on the 6th of the following month, a \$35.00 late fee penalty will be applied to the affected account on the 6th (at the beginning of the business day 8:30 a.m.) of the month.
- If payment for the month that had a late fee applied is not received along with the late fee by the close of business (5 p.m.) on the 20th of the following month, a cut-off order shall be issued on the 21st (at the start of business 8:30 a.m.) to the Public Utilities Department for the termination of service.
- A delinquent fee shall be charged on the day of cut off for any account in arrears. The delinquent fee is based on the Rate Fee Schedule that is in effect at the time of cut off.
- Once a customer's account is placed on the cut-off list, the past due amount including any other fees along with current balance must be paid in full before service is restored.

Columbus County is making these changes to better serve its customers and to make the late fee/utility cut-off policies and procedures more clear. If anyone has any questions about this matter, please call the Utilities Collection Department at 910-642-5257.

2. WATER CONNECTIONS:

Connections to the County water system may be authorized by the Utilities Collection Department with payment of proper fees (deposits, late fees, reconnect fees etc.). All transactions that occur prior to 2:00 PM will be handled the same business day. Transactions that occur after 2:00 PM will be handled the next business day.

New water connections requiring a tap will be handled after completion of an Application for Service and payment of all fees and deposits. Service is usually provided within 10 to 15 business days, weather permitting, after the customer request.

If water connections for a customer crosses other property lines, it is the responsibility of the customer to secure all easements and other legal documents at their expense to permit the connection to occur.

If more than one heir is identified for a property that is requesting a water connection, all identified heirs are required to provide notarized permission to allow one of the heirs to request connection to the water system.

By requesting water service and payment of a connection fee, the recipient of water service hereby understands and agrees to pay the minimum monthly water bill whether connected to the system or not and using water after such is made available to the dwelling for a minimum of five (5) years.

If a customer requests to be disconnected from the Columbus County public water supply system and the service materials have already been installed on the property, the customer will not be disconnected until they have paid the base rate fee for a minimum of five (5) years. If after five (5) years the customer requests disconnection, they will be required to pay a \$250 fee prior to Public Utilities performing the disconnection and removing the service from the property. Disconnections will be evaluated on a case by case basis by the Columbus County Administration Office.

The County agrees to deliver water to the meter(s) that is servicing the customer's premises at a minimum pressure of twenty (20) pounds per square inch (psi), but shall not be held liable or responsible for any damage in or on the customer's property resulting from system pressures greater than twenty (20) psi.

The Property Owner, Customer, and/or Renter agrees that no other present or future source of water shall be connected to any water lines served by the County's public water supply system. The Property Owner, Customer, and/or Renter shall disconnect from any present water supply prior to connection to and switching to the County's system and shall eliminate any present or future cross-connection in the customer's system. Any Property Owner, Customer, and/or Renter found to be in noncompliance with these Rules and Regulations may have water service(s) terminated, if deemed necessary by the County, until which time the cross-connection(s) is eliminated.

3. FEES, PENALTIES, CHARGES:

All fees, penalties, and charges shall be listed as part of the rate schedule and shall be set from time to time by the Columbus County Board of Commissioners as deemed necessary.

4. EXTENSIONS:

An extension of payment due date may be given to those customers determined to be in "***good fiscal standing***" with the Public Utilities Department. A customer in "***good fiscal standing***" shall be defined as any customer with no prior extensions, no returned check(s), and no service terminations for non-payment during the previous twelve (12) consecutive month period or since becoming a customer with Columbus County, whichever is less. The amount extended shall be paid in full on or before the 1st day of the following month or by an agreement with the Finance Director or his designee.

5. PAYMENT ARRANGEMENTS:

Payment arrangements may be available to residential utility customers when billing exceeds more than double the highest billing within a twelve (12) month period. Financing of exceedingly high bills shall be 0% interest, with a down payment of 25% of balance requiring financing, and not to exceed a term of more than 6 months.

Financed amounts will be billed monthly in addition to each month's current billing. Financed amounts and current bill must be paid each month prior to due date to avoid any late payment or delinquent fees being assessed on the account. In order to qualify for financing/payment arrangements, the customer's account must be in good standing and shall not have been cut off for non-payment within the preceding twelve (12) month period.

6. AUTHORIZATION OF EXTENSION OR PAYMENT ARRANGEMENT:

The Finance Officer, or their designee, shall have the authority to approve extensions or financing of payment arrangements.

C. ACCOUNT BALANCE:

In the event a customer disconnects his or her service or the Public Utilities Department disconnects the service, for any reason, the account balance due for water usage, late penalties, and all other applicable fees are the sole responsibility of that customer. The Finance Department shall review all outstanding debt owed to the County for water services provided. Each month, the Finance Department shall make the following attempts to collect outstanding debt:

- 1.** The Utilities Collection Department shall send to the customer a monthly bill. Customer is to make payment in full by the 5TH of each month. If no response; then,
- 2.** The Department shall transfer the security deposit to the customer's account, if any outstanding balance still remains; then,
- 3.** The Department shall send notification to Debt Set-Off; a program with the North Carolina Treasurer's Department, for payment to collect from IRS for any tax refunds or lottery winnings that customer may receive which will go toward the utility bill.
- 4.** The Department shall notify other utility operation systems throughout the State of North Carolina of this customer's indebtedness to the County.
- 5.** All customers that have been disconnected with outstanding account balances shall **NOT** be reconnected until all indebtedness is paid in full to the County.
- 6.** The late fee and/or delinquent fee may be waived if the customer's account has never been assessed any penalties during the life of the account. Thereafter, a late fee and/or delinquent fee may be waived once only if the customer signs up for Automatic Clearing House (ACH Draft).

RELEASES OF UNCOLLECTED UTILITY BILLS:

All utility bills are to be presented to Columbus County Board of Commissioners for release consideration after they are three (3) months old and all possible collection methods have been exhausted. If the customer attempts to reinstate a utility account after the outstanding bill is released, the outstanding amount must be paid in full prior to any new services being activated.

D. ADJUSTMENTS:

1. DEFINITIONS

The Customer side shall be defined as that side of the meter (house side) where the customer connects to the meter provided by the County and beyond.

The County's side shall be defined as that side of the meter, including the meter, where the County service line (highway side) connects to the meter and back to the main.

A water bill adjustment will not be provided when the following criteria are met:

- a. Leaks from exposed piping will not be considered for a leak adjustment.
- b. All metered water loss due to negligence on the part of the user will be charged at the normal rate, and no adjustment of the bill shall be made.

A water bill adjustment will be provided when the following criteria are met:

- a. All water line repairs on the customer's side have been completed.
- b. Evidence of repairs such as plumbing bills and/or a statement from the plumber or customer that the leak repairs have been completed.
- c. Adjustments can be given for leaks on amounts exceeding the average bill based on a calculation of the preceding twelve (12) months if the adjustment exceeds \$50.00.
- d. Only one adjustment shall be made in a twelve (12) month period. If the leak is reflected on two consecutive water bills, adjustments will be made on both bills.
- e. If the customer receives an excessive water bill and the cause is a defect in a water meter, the water bill shall be the average for the previous six (6) months. Defects will be confirmed by staff with the Public Utilities Department.

2. LEAKS ON CUSTOMER'S SIDE OF METER:

In the event that a leak occurred on the customer's side of the meter, customer is to make the repair(s) within (15) fifteen days of the leak. Customer shall obtain a Leak Repair Statement (obtained from the Utilities Collection Department), signed and notarized by the plumber or customer that the leak repairs have been made. The customer's account will be adjusted to

the average monthly minimum usage of the past twelve (12) months. Any leak repair(s) that are not completed within the (15) fifteen day period will forfeit the leak adjustment. All leak adjustments must be approved and signed by the Finance Director or his designee.

3. REPAYMENT:

Repayment of this extraordinary balance can be paid in full or the amount due may be paid in installments, so long as it is approved by the Finance Director or his designee. The period of time allowed for the repayment of this extraordinary balance shall not exceed three (3) consecutive billing periods.

E. DAMAGED LIABILITY:

The County shall not be liable for damage of any kind resulting from water or the use of water on the customer's property, unless damage results directly from negligence on behalf of the County. The County shall not be responsible for damages done by or resulting from any defect in the piping, fixtures, appliances, etc. on the customer's property.

The County shall not be responsible for negligence of third parties or forces beyond the control of the County resulting in any interruption of service. Otherwise, under normal conditions, all potentially affected customers shall be notified in advance of any interruption of service.

Customers who tamper or damage County meters (including all components thereof) and etc., will be reported to appropriate law enforcement and will be charged the appropriate fees as approved by the County Commissioners which will include the actual cost involved to repair/replace the property (see rate fee schedule). All applicable charges will be billed to the customer, along with their monthly water bill, and payment will be due by the due date printed on the bill. If payment is not received by the due date, a cut-off order will be issued during normal business hours to the Public Utilities Department for the termination of service.

Customers who intentionally tamper with the meter a second time or steal water that is County property will have their service removed immediately and be reported to appropriate law enforcement agency for investigation. In order to reconnect to the County water system, they will be responsible for paying for new service at the current rate and pay all outstanding balances.

F. SEPARATE WATER CONNECTIONS AND METERS REQUIRED:

Each building shall have a separate meter, and where practicable, shall have a separate water lateral. In the event that one lateral is used for two (2) dwellings, commercial or industrial buildings, or used to serve two or more meters for the same dwelling, commercial or industrial buildings, a separate cut-off shall be provided for each meter.

However, there shall be an exception to the requirement for separate water meters in the case of groups of mobile homes or apartment developments under single ownership. In the case of said groups of mobile homes or apartment developments of more than ten (10) units, one (1) meter may be used for the entire project unless additional meters are requested by the property owner or deemed necessary by the Public Utilities Department, and the following conditions shall be met:

1. All bills will be rendered to the Owner of the property.
2. The bill will be calculated by a minimum charge for the master meter, which shall be based on the number of units served times the minimum charge per standard $\frac{3}{4}$ inch meter. The remaining bill shall be based on the total consumption passing through the master meter times the unit commodity charge.
3. Should any portion of the development be sold; the owners shall be responsible for paying whatever additional costs would be involved in bringing the divided development into compliance.
4. Cost of service shall be included in the rent/lease of each unit, and no individual meters shall be allowed.
5. In the case of group mobile homes or apartment developments where ten (10) or fewer units are involved, and where ownership is in one party, the owner may elect to have a single meter used for the entire project. Where such election is made the owner shall comply with the conditions set forth as 1, 2, 3, and 4 above.

G. PROFANE, INDECENT, AND THREATING CALL:

It is against North Carolina General Statute 14-196 to use “*profane*, indecent or threatening language to any persons over the telephone; annoying or harassing by repeated telephoning or making false statement over the telephone.”

If a call of this nature is received, do the following:

1. At the first profane or indecent word, ask the caller to please refrain from that type of language. If the profane or indecent language continues, politely inform the caller that if that type of language does not cease that the call will be terminated.
2. Document the occurrence including the caller’s name, address and telephone number, if known. Report incident to your supervisor, including the above information.
3. If the calls continue, notify your supervisor.

Adopted and effective this the 20th day of June, 2022.

Ricky Bullard, Chairman

Amanda B. Prince, Staff Attorney/Deputy Clerk