

Residents likely to feel financial burden of water meters



Sprinklers may be a thing of the past if water bills go up with meters.

By Kathryn Reed

The 163 water meters to be installed this year is a drop in the bucket considering South Tahoe Public Utility District needs to put in 10,000 in the next 16 years.

Federal stimulus money (\$4.5 million) is paying for 1,500 meters. Based on the strings attached to the cash, the district had to show progress on the project by this fall. That is why STPUD is seeking bids until 2pm Sept. 29.

Another component of the grant is that it's for low income segments of the community – all but the Tahoe Keys qualifies. The district is going to put in meters where it is doing water line work – Ski Run, Al Tahoe and parts of Gardner Mountain are targeted in the first round.

Metered water systems are in the future for all Californians

because of legislation passed in 2004. By 2025 every urban water supplier, which is defined as a district with more than 3,000 connections, must have meters installed.

“We are still seeking through the state Legislature a little bit of flexibility with the 2025 deadline because there is only X number of dollars we can raise from 14,000 customers,” said Dennis Cocking, STPUD spokesman. “Our challenge is we don’t disagree meters are important. We said the primary threat in the basin is fire and we are not going to take money away from replacing water lines to put in meters. That is not responsible to our community.”

The board formed an ad hoc committee at its Aug. 20 meeting. Their job is to figure out how to pay for the meters. Grants are being sought, but ratepayers are likely to foot part of the bill.

South Tahoe PUD tried to get out of the regulations altogether by explaining to Sacramento that the district is not part of the California watershed – it is part of Nevada’s. This is because Lake Tahoe flows into the Truckee River toward Nevada, which flows into Pyramid Lake in the Silver State.

California denied STPUD that exemption. The district is still waiting to see if the 2025 deadline can be extended.

“What is driving this is water is becoming a more and more contentious issue in this state,” Cocking said.

That’s why desalinization projects are being talked about again, as well as conservation and recycled water.

Recycled water is not allowed in the Lake Tahoe Basin because of the Porter Cologne Water Quality Control Act. It wasn’t until this year that California had a formal recycled water policy.

“I think the fact of the matter is at some point in time

recycled water within certain parameters might be acceptable in the Tahoe basin. It might be a decade or more. It will have to be tightly monitored," Cocking said.

Of the nearly 650 commercial connections STPUD has, all have been metered for a couple decades. About 3,000 of the 14,000 residential customers are metered. However, the residential ones have not been read – instead customers are charged a flat rate like everyone else.

Starting in 2011 those metered customers along with the ones being put in via the federal stimulus money, will be billed based on the meter reading.

"The trick is to try to develop a rate so the average customer on metered rate or flat is very similar. That will be the real challenge," Cocking said.

The district is using 2010 to gather information from the meters to gauge water use; and to educate those with meters.

The cost of water is in the infrastructure – extracting water, purifying it, delivering it. That accounts for about 85 percent of a bill, while the other 15 percent is consumption, according to Cocking.

The impetus behind meters is when people have control over how much they spend on a commodity; they'll do what they can to reduce the cost – in this case, using less water.

With second homeowners currently paying what full-time residents pay, they are in affect subsidizing those who live here. It would seem inevitable that water bills will spike dramatically when the metered system is in place.

The district hopes to install 600-800 meters a year. The total cost is estimated at \$20 million.

Meters are read by driving down a street using a radio signal that emits information. This beats the old days of having to

locate the meter through mounds of snow or overgrown brush. Technology is being developed where in the future water use might be transmitted electronically to a computer without anyone driving by a house.

Most likely residents in the city limits of South Lake Tahoe will have meters first. This is because that is where the oldest water lines are – some as small as 2 inches. Much of El Dorado County has 6-inch lines or larger.

This is the third construction season that STPUD has put in meter vaults as it replaces water lines.

Many of the water line projects have been funded through the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act, which is expected to be introduced this session for re-authorization by Congress.