



Meeting Summary

Water and Wastewater Utility Rate Study Community Advisory Group (RSCAG)

January 26, 2021

6:30 – 8:00 p.m. ET

RSCAG Members Attending

Lily Duran
Peter Robertson
Bob Orttung
Heitham Ghariani
Nora Palmatier
Rafael Sampayo
Michael Mesmer
Kathleen Harrison
Herschel Kanter
Regina Boston

RSCAG Members Absent

Matt Gerber
Daniel Logan

County Staff and Consultants Attending

Mike Collins, Department of Environmental Services
Krista Bourgon-Abele, Department of Environmental Services
Lisa Wilson, Department of Environmental Services
Bart Kreps, Raftelis
Will Kerr, Raftelis
Jason Gershowitz, Kearns & West
Sam Ramsey, Kearns & West

1. WELCOME & AGENDA REVIEW

Jason Gershowitz, the RSCAG facilitator, opened the meeting by welcoming participants and members of the public to the sixth RSCAG Meeting. Mr. Gershowitz reviewed the meeting agenda and webinar participation guidelines and noted that this meeting was being recorded.

Mike Collins, Department of Environmental Services, thanked RSCAG members for their time, effort, and attention that they have contributed to the engagement process. He noted that Arlington County looks forward to their continued involvement and insights to the process ahead.

2. PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT TIMELINE

Mr. Gershowitz reviewed the updated timeline for the public engagement. He highlighted that the remainder of the County's scope of public engagement has been significantly informed through feedback and input from the RSCAG group.

Mr. Gershowitz explained that in February 2021 there will be a broad public engagement effort to seek feedback on the proposed rate structure primarily through virtual means. Participants will learn about the

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proposed rate structure and provide feedback on how the proposed rate structure incorporates community values via online tools and feedback forms. As part of this engagement effort, Arlington County will also host a public webinar in February 2021 to share the proposed rate structure and receive feedback from the public on how the rate structure incorporates the values and concerns of the community. Once this period of engagement ends, the project team will consolidate feedback and propose the new rate structure to the Arlington County Board. If the Arlington County Board approves the proposed rate structure, the project team anticipates that the new water and wastewater rate structure will be implemented on January 1, 2022.

Mr. Gershowitz highlighted that the proposed water and wastewater rate structure is directly connected to the overall fiscal year (FY) 2022 budget process for Arlington County. The advertisement of the proposed rate structure and budget is scheduled to occur on February 20, 2021. There will be a public hearing for the FY 2022 budget on April 8, 2021. The adoption of the rate structure and budget is anticipated to occur on April 23, 2021.

Throughout the project, the RSCAG has provided helpful insights on how to communicate this rate structure to the broader Arlington County community. Following the adoption of the rate structure and budget, the project team will implement Phase II of engagement communications, which will focus on educating the public on the new rate structure through social media updates, website information, emails and target mailings, and Customer Contact Center notifications to customers.

3. ONLINE ENGAGEMENT OVERVIEW

Mr. Gershowitz offered an overview of the online engagement methods that Arlington County will employ during the virtual public engagement period. During this period, the County will use an online questionnaire to present the proposed rate structure and offer an opportunity to provide comments. Specifically, this engagement opportunity will allow the public to:

- view the new rate structure by customer class
- explore individual impacts using a Water Bill Calculator, and
- share feedback on the proposed rate structure.

Mr. Gershowitz emphasized that educational materials have been developed based on feedback provided by the RSCAG on how to communicate the proposed rate structure. Next Mr. Gershowitz introduced the first proposed rate structure for single-family residents and County staff (Lisa Wilson) provided a demonstration on how to explore the new components of the proposed rate structure by walking through the interactive document.

For each customer class, an interactive document is provided that describes the new components of the proposed rate structure and how it aligns with the community's prioritized values and concerns. The document also provides a comparison between the existing rate structure and the proposed rate structure to demonstrate the difference in customer tiers and rates. For example, the single-family residential rate structure document describes the proposed rate structure and the prioritized community values that are incorporated into the structure, including equity between customer classes, base charge, tiered rate structure, and average winter consumption. The document features interactive icons that to see how the value is related to each rate structure component and offers a video explainer on how and why average winter consumption is incorporated into the proposed rate structure.

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After the demonstration, RSCAG members provided feedback on the presentation of the proposed rate structure, offering ideas to make the concepts clearer. The same features and explanations were offered in the multi-family property and commercial business documents. Mr. Gershowitz explained that the development of these products was from direct feedback from the RSCAG on how to best communicate the differences between customer classes.

Next, Mr. Gershowitz demonstrated an example of how Arlington County's Water Bill Calculator will operate. He explained that residents will be able to enter specific information, such as their account number, to pull up their water bill and see how the proposed rate might impact their bill. Customers will also have the ability to overwrite their consumption to understand how their quarterly bill would be impacted if they increased or decreased their water consumption patterns.

The final element of the virtual engagement includes the opportunity for residents to share feedback on the proposed rate structure. A questionnaire will offer a text field for respondents to enter comments and questions on the proposed rate structure.

Mr. Gershowitz concluded the online engagement overview by reviewing the County's communication and public engagement tactics. The categories of engagement are summarized below:

- Online, Broad Communications & Public Engagement
 - Project Webpage
 - 76engage / Engage Arlington Platform
 - Postcard Mailer
 - Existing County Communications
- Key Stakeholder Consultation
 - Rate Study Community Advisory Group
- Forums for Community Interaction & Input
 - Teams Live Q&A Session
- Connecting at Existing Community Events
 - Briefings for Partners, Commissions, and other Groups

4. ADVISORY GROUP REFLECTIONS

This agenda session offered RSCAG members the opportunity to reflect and share feedback on their involvement in the engagement process, including the engagement and meeting structure, project communication, and project outcomes. RSCAG member reflections are summarized below:

- **Engagement Process:** Many RSCAG members shared their support for the level of engagement afforded to the advisory group and members of the public throughout the project. They reflected that the group was very representative of community interests. RSCAG members appreciated the ability to ask questions and provide feedback on the process and products.
- **Project Communications:** Advisory group members reflected that the project communications were very useful in helping RSCAG members understand this complex issue. They shared that topics were explained clearly, which made it easy to become engaged and involved in the engagement process. This level of communication made it easy for RSCAG members to relay materials to their respective interest groups.

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- **Wastewater Plant Tour:** Several RSCAG members mentioned that the opportunity to tour Arlington County’s Wastewater Treatment Plant was very valuable to connect the rate structure process to the physical infrastructure. One RSCAG member reflected that it might have been valuable to offer public tours of the Treatment Plant as an educational opportunity for the public.

Following the reflections of each advisory group member, the RSCAG reached a consensus to provide a letter of support for the project’s engagement process and outcome. The RSCAG agreed that Kearns & West would draft the letter on their behalf and then each advisory group member would provide feedback and comments on the letter before finalizing and sending it to the Arlington County Board.

RSCAG members emphasized that the outreach should communicate the prioritized values first, and then explain how the proposed rate structure aligns with the prioritized values. They recommended that the letter of support address how equity among customer classes is incorporated into the proposed structure, as well as how the utility structure is cost recovery and not designed to subsidize other residents’ utility bills.

5. NEXT STEPS

Mr. Gershowitz reviewed the action items and next steps from the RSCAG Meeting. He relayed that Kearns & West, as independent facilitators, will draft the letter of support on behalf of the RSCAG. Per the RSCAG’s request, this letter will address equity and the utility’s cost recovery approach. Kearns & West will make the letter available to the RSCAG to review and provide feedback. RSCAG members were encouraged to continuing sharing additional information to be included within the letter with the project team.

6. Q&A FROM ADVISORY GROUP MEMBERS

Throughout the meeting, Advisory Group Members shared questions and answers captured in the table below.

Ref	Question or Comment	Response
1	Consider updating the interactive documents to be more readable on a mobile device.	Thank you for the feedback. The County will assess whether there are any design components that can be implemented to help with readability.
2	I would recommend including a note under both charts – the existing structure and the proposed structure – that quarterly rates are based on a per thousand-gallon metered usage. I would also recommend noting the correlating value within the header of each call-out box.	
3	Regarding the tier classifications for the single-family residential rate structure, residents would pay \$3.84 if they used between 0 – 9 thousand gallons in Tier 1, and then they would pay \$6.14 if they	Yes, that is correct. To reiterate, the rates might adjust over time, but the classifications between Tier 1 (0 – 9 thousand gallons) and Tier 2 (>9 thousand gallons) will remain the same.

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	used greater than 9 thousand gallons in Tier 2, correct?	
4	What is the percentage of customers in each category?	Approximately 30 – 35% of Arlington County customers would fall in Tier 1. The typical customer uses ~12 TG per quarter, so they would fall in Tier 2.
5	Is wastewater billing based on your average winter consumption? This should be heavily emphasized within the interactive document.	Yes, that is correct; a resident’s winter period consumption determines how they will be billed for wastewater. This billing structure addresses water not returned to the system during the summer.
6	Will the interactive documents be available in more languages? Will the County print out these documents, so residents who do not have access to a computer can read about the proposed rate?	Yes, the County is planning to translate this document, and others, into Spanish. The County is looking to RSCAG members to provide insights on translation needs. Before the pandemic, the County would have participated in community events to inform residents about the new rate structure. Please let the County know if there are documents that should be printed out.
7	In the proposed structure, the wastewater charge is the same between Tier 1 and Tier 2. This looks off when assessing the proposed structure from an affordability and equity standpoint. While the irrigation community was able to voice their opinion during the engagement process, the low-to-moderate income community might not have been able to. For example, the base charge is going to affect the low-to-moderate income community more. It is important to remember that the public that participates during the engagement process is not fully representative of Arlington County residents.	Thank you for this comment. We hope the engagement process has been inclusive of all populations through the RSCAG and the County’s participation at pop-up events. The bill calculator will also be a helpful tool to demonstrate the impact of the proposed rate structure on customers’ bills.
8	It might be useful to have a document that shows the rate structure comparison between single-family residential, multi-family residential, and commercial customer classes. This would enable people to be able to see the differences between customer classes and monthly versus quarterly billing. It might also be helpful to include a table that demonstrates the aggregate being collected from each customer class.	Thank you for this recommendation. The approach for the proposed rate structure is cost recovery per use. The County will highlight that as an essential value that had to be included within the new rate structure.

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9	I think the bill calculator is a great idea. This would be a helpful tool to have every year for budgeting purposes.	The County is planning on hosting this tool on the Arlington County webpage once we transition to operationalizing the results of the rate structure.
10	What would the bill calculator look like for a multi-family resident?	The bill calculator includes the same functionality for a multi-family resident. For a multi-family residence, the County anticipates that this tool will be primarily used by a landlord or homeowners association since most multi-family residences are not individually metered. The County does not anticipate much engagement with apartment-dwellers. For this reason, the County made the engagement options very distinct: "I am a singly family owner" versus "I manage or own multi-family residence." This helps to make the rate structure options very clear.

7. PUBLIC COMMENT

There were no public comments during this meeting.

8. CLOSING REMARKS

Jason Gershowitz summarized that the 6th RSCAG meeting presentation and recording will be posted on the website.

Mike Collins, Krista Abele, and Lisa Wilson concluded the RSCAG meeting by thanking individuals for their role in supporting and advancing the Study.