

TOWN OF ANDREWS TOWN HALL MEETING
ANDREWS HIGH SCHOOL AUDITORIUM
12890 COUNTY LINE ROAD
ANDREWS, SC 29510
TUESDAY, AUGUST 1, 2023 @ 6:30 PM

AGENDA

- 1. CALL TO ORDER**
- 2. INVOCATION**
- 3. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**
- 4. ROLL CALL**
- 5. GENERAL INFORMATION PRESENTATIONS**
- 6. CITIZENS QUESTIONS & ANSWERS**
- 7. ADJOURNMENT**

Town of Andrews

Town Hall Meeting Tuesday August 1, 2023; 6:00 p.m. Andrews High School Auditorium Andrews, SC 29510

Town Hall Meeting

The Town of Andrews met for a Town Hall Meeting Tuesday, August 1, 2023. Mayor Frank McClary presiding in compliance with the Freedom of Information Act, called the meeting to order at 6:15 p.m.

The invocation was rendered by Evangelist Dogoris Brown.

Pledge of Allegiance was recited by everyone.

Town Officials Present:

Mayor Frank McClary

Mayor Pro Tem Eddie Lee

Council Member Angela Anderson

Council Member Amy Flagler

General Information Presentation

Mayor McClary informed everyone that the purpose of this meeting is to provide clarification of the analysis that was previously discussed concerning two major factors that have affected customers' water bills; an aging system and rapid changes in personnel. The effects from these two factors became apparent in July of 2022 and have continued to get worse over time. Bills were generated and customers received bills that were higher than normal which led to customers calling to inquire about the accuracy of their bills. At that time, it was assumed that this was a result of a system failure but after thorough analysis it became relevant that the problem was much deeper than the system. However, as the town worked with the software company some inconsistencies were revealed in the various billing processes used to generate meter reads for billing as well as human errors. Mayor McClary made reference to the fact that when he took office in 2016 the town had over \$500,000.00 in uncollected water bills much of which was a result of not charging people and illegal activities. As of today, some issues have been resolved and others have not.

The analysis of billing systems revealed that out of the 1623 account holders, 1433 accounts had no issues. 127 accounts needed to be adjusted due to abnormal readings and 35 accounts with water leaks that need to be repaired by a licensed plumber before action can be taken, 3 with outstanding balances due to nonpayment since this issue began and 25 accounts with outstanding balances. There were six different categories/cycles of bills created during the most recent billing process. However, it was discovered that 300 accounts still did not have a bill generated during the last billing cycle. This issue is currently being reviewed and an update will be given at a later date. Each bill that was mailed contained a memorandum that identified the cycle for that billing. The bills included six months of charges for services rendered for which accountholders were not billed. The charges included the flat base meter rate and 1,000 gallons of volume for those months and the monthly garbage collection fee if applicable.

The monthly flat rate is \$28.03. The calculation of 1,000 gallons is \$9.48 for accounts inside of the town limits and \$19.33 for accounts outside of the town limits. Garbage collection is \$20.00 per month inside of the town limits and \$25.00 outside of the town limits. The bills for account holders who receive garbage collection contain a \$60.00 garbage recoup, for July, September and November, three months of garbage collection in 2022 when bills were not generated but the service was rendered. Customers were informed that if they have an active account with no volume, they will receive a flat rate bill for meter charges and garbage collection if you are within the town limits. Outside customers have the option to opt out of garbage collection service.

Much consideration was given to this billing cycle; the town could not afford to not charge customers for services received throughout this ordeal but at the same time customers received a bill for much less than the volume used during the six-month period. In addition, no penalties or disconnections occurred during this six-month period when no bills were generated. Mayor McClary explained in detail about the water and sewer account being a proprietary account which generates funds that can only be allocated to cover expenses related to water and sewer. For years the town's general fund account had to support water and sewer account due to an aging system and years of neglectful maintenance. This has been a continuous pattern over many years; it was noted that the water and sewer system should be self-sustaining, meaning that the funds generated by this department should be able to support the entire operation. Mayor McClary reminded everyone that the town was under a consent order by DHEC to increase its rates by 60 percent to be able to maintain its system. The town was fortunate enough to offer a plan to make the mandated rate increase in increments starting in 2016. The most recent increase was a 3.50% increase. Andrews is very fortunate to have its own water supply system that consists of three wells that pumps 400 gallons per minute. Environmental Services, a DHEC certified testing company out of Conway, SC performs routine testing of the town's water on a monthly basis. The town has plans to implement a new modern water meter reading system that will address a lot of the concerns with our current system.

The system contains 24 systems that must be maintained and most of them are worn which leads to pump failure. Pumps fail for various reasons; a lot of the failure is due to citizens putting foreign objects into the system and thus the pumps must be replaced which is very costly. As a result, DHEC placed the town under water and sewer consent order. As of today, the town is no longer under the water consent order. The town had to hire an engineering company to assess and perform an analysis of the town's system to determine what is needed to properly run and maintain the system to include equipment and personnel. The town owns its water and sewer system and must receive a permit from DHEC to operate. DHEC guidance stipulates that anyone that lives within 300 ft of a public system must tap into the system even if you have a functional septic tank. Individuals living outside of the town limits that have a septic tank are allowed to use and maintain a septic tank.

Throughout this ordeal no services to customers were interrupted or penalties applied and the town was able to pay its debt and be approved for grants due to its good financial standing. The bills have a due date of August 21, 2023. The town will work with individual account holders by setting up a payment plan for those who are not able to pay their bill in full by the due date. A sign-up sheet was available at the meeting for customers to sign up to receive an appointment to discuss concerns with their bills.

Questions and Answers Session

Debra Wright: "What is a trash recap charge?" Mayor McClary explained that is the charge for garbage collection service for July, September and November of 2022, when services were rendered but no bills were generated.

Katie Luetthers: "Can you explain the office shutting down to audit each account? Business should go on daily no matter the issue in the real world. I was told this is what the delay in billing was. Also, you do not bill on a possible usage of 1000 gallons and this information should have been stated before the billing took place." Mayor McClary stated that the office was closed for a half day. It was an executive decision based upon being short-staffed, other unexpected occurrences and employees needed time to focus solely on preparing and reviewing bills before being mailed, thus the office was closed for two hours. Mayor McClary added that the last thing he wants to do is not to have service available to citizens but there comes a time when tough decisions must be made.

The Town Administrator, Mauretta Wilson added that prior to this time period it was brought to the town's attention that there was a software issue that led to a malfunction during the transfer of files from one system to another. This was the first alert to a system error. In addition, there was a lack of due diligence for a number of months internally; once this was recognized the billing process had to be stopped because this malfunction caused the billing reading dates, and meter readings to be out of whack and no one assigned to that duty cared or did what they were suppose to do. The executive decision to close the office for two hours had to be made in order to ensure that no more bills were sent out until the exact problems could be identified, verified, alternatives explored to solving the problems, implementation of the appropriate solutions and the results could be evaluated. These important steps took a considerable amount of time to implement considering the office being short staffed and the number of accounts involved.

Ms. Wilson thanked the customers who exercised patience throughout this ordeal and those who continued to pay on their accounts. She voiced her concerns about those who were not patient or kind through this ordeal while corrective actions were taken to resolve this billing issues. She applauded the employees who had to endure verbal abuse from customers who called or visited the during their moments of frustration and spoke to the employees as if they were less than human. This is not and will never be acceptable regardless of any circumstance.

Kim Cribb: "When the system is up and running properly how will this affect our bills with the current reading not being actual? Is this current reading an analysis? Also, will the updated system allow for payments to be made on a website?" Mayor McClary stated that the current reading is not an analysis. Customers will see the correct billing period on their next bill. He stated that the only thing that was assessed and is not your true usage is the \$411.00, only 1000 gallons was applied, not the true volume used by each customer. The town is not equipped to accept online payments at this time; however, the town can accept payments by phone.

Stephanie Johnson: "Who responds when a leak is reported?" Mayor McClary responded that from the customer's house to the easement is the customer's responsibility. The town owns everything inside the meter box; if the box was installed property, it should have a hand valve that the customer can cut the

water off to make repairs on their side of the property. If the leak is in the street or outside of the property line, then the town is responsible for making the necessary repairs.

Lizzie Carroll: "How did the town come up with the average when we did not see the meter reader?" Mayor McClary responded that the average used in the recent billing was not based on actual meter readings. The bill was generated by calculating the flat meter rate charges and only a 1000 volume charge.

Herbert White: "I pay my bill each month, why have I received a bill for \$411.00? Why hasn't my account been credited with my monthly payments? Where were those payments applied?" Mayor McClary stated that a similar situation was brought to their attention today. Customers were told if they have a payment receipt and the payment is not posted to their account, please contact Town Hall so that the issue can be fully reviewed. He further explained that if customers received a bill for a second residence and the home is vacant and the actual water used is less than 1000, please call and inform us so that those bills can be addressed. He reminded everyone it's clearly stated on the application for water and sewer service that it's the responsibility of the customer to complete a disconnection application to discontinue service before a home is abandoned, otherwise the account holder will continue to receive a flat rate bill until the town is notified.

Lila Moyd: "Whose problem is this? Will this happen again? Will the meter be read every month?" Mayor McClary stated that there were problems across the board in addition to human error. These things aren't predictable but those responsible for ensuring that this type of situation doesn't occur will have to stay on top of things.

Jenny Hunt: "When will Andrews have an official website?" Mayor McClary responded hopefully soon. He explained that the town has been taking advantage of other free platforms and Facebook Live to disseminate the town's business to save money and to afford the town funding to address the top priority issues. However, it is the goal to have a functional website up and running asap. Ms. Wilson added that the town is currently engaged in a contract for website services and to engage in a new contract with another company would set the town up to be sued for breach of contract. The town wants to make sure that former contract has expired before moving forward with this process. In the interim the town is looking at Go Gov which has the capability of sending mass messages via text messaging to customers cell phone.

Allison Newton: "How many workers are in the water department? How many are needed? Who is responsible to pick up barriers after work is complete? Is there a paper trail to determine work orders as requested by residents?" Mayor McClary stated that the billing system used by the water and sewer department can track work orders. The public works department has ten employees and every work process that the department engages in is a team effort.

"How many permanent lift stations does the town have? How many are temporary? How many need repairs?" Mayor McClary stated that the town currently have 17 working lift stations and 1 is offline.

"Who approved the 1k gallon usage for every household? Was town council involved in determining the process of getting accurate meters and bills? What is the name of the software system the town uses?"

Mayor McClary stated that the Town Council was briefed on the process. However, this process clearly falls under the day-to-day operations under the mayor's directive. Nicholson Business System is the name of the software that the town is currently using.

"What is the difference between the different billing cycles?" The difference is various issues concerning the bills and whether the accounts are inside or outside of the town limits.

"Where can residents find the policies and procedures for the water department, such as the town versus resident responsibility for maintenance and upkeep?" Mayor McClary stated that this is found in chapter 17 Utility Section of the Town Codes.

"Why weren't customers at least billed for trash?" Mayor McClary stated that there is only one bill, all things inclusive.

"Has the \$10 Million dollar grant been awarded or applied for? What are those grants for?" Mayor McClary stressed how important it is when the town applies for both Federal and State grant funding, and those funds are awarded. There are strict guidelines that must be adhered to by all parties concerned, to ensure that the funds are received, recorded, budgeted for and expended on the sole purpose for which they were applied for and awarded.

Wendell McGee: "Can the town assist the customers by granting a reduction on the sewer portion of the bills? This is something that we are not use to." Mayor McClary stated that this is not possible because that would affect the town's water usage count that has to be reported to DHEC.

Derrick Grove: stated that he had a previous balance of \$208.25 and came to Town Hall to dispute the balance. He provided his contact information, but he never received a call. Now the new bill has been added to his previous balance. He further stated that his previous bill never should have been \$208.25 when he usually pays \$48.00 to \$60.00 monthly. Mayor McClary told him to sign up for an appointment to have his account reviewed.

Jennifer Smith: "Before bills were sent out why were bills not checked and prorated? I was billed the same for a house that no one lives in, and water is never used." Mayor McClary stated that some things slipped by but now that it has been brought to our attention it will be reviewed.

Allison Newton: "How many certified officers do we currently have on staff with the Town of Andrews? What is the average of the \$800 annual budget for a skeleton staff? What is being done to recruit qualified officers?"

Chief Christopher Cockrell stated that there are three certified officers on staff. However, there is an officer on duty everyday working a 12-hour shift. The department's schedule is shared with the Sheriff's

Department and that office covers the other 12 hours every day. The APD has two recruit officers who are ready to attend the police academy. There are two more candidates that are currently completing the application phase.

All new applicants must come and first complete the departments application process which includes a psychological evaluation, medical physical and drug screening. The first four weeks consist of on-the-job training. During this initial four weeks the officer will complete a series of computer-based training courses. The last eight weeks will be spent attending the SC Police Academy training in Columbia, SC.

Chief Cockrell stated that he is in constant contact with the local technical colleges seeking potential candidates. He has been reaching out to two certified officers and trying to get them to join the APD, but money is a major factor. He's very excited and feels confident that the office will soon be fully staffed.

"Why isn't the Andrews Police Chief investigating the recent shooting that occurred at the Corvette Club?" Chief Cockrell stated that the night which the shooting took place, it was doing the twelve-hour shift and the Georgetown Sheriff Department was on shift in Andrews, but the last he heard was that the shooter had already turned himself in to the Sheriff Office. He encouraged all to work together and stressed the importance of citizens reporting any information to law enforcement agencies that they are aware of that possibly lead to the arrest of criminals committing crimes in the town.

Charles Altman: "What is the Andrews Police Department doing to arrest the thieves in Andrews, his home has been broken into; the suspects have been arrested and taken to the County Detention Center and are released and back on the street shortly thereafter." He asked why they don't keep these individuals in jail? In response Chief Cockrell informed the citizens that it's the decision of the judge to retain the suspects in jail or to release them back into society. Chief stated that we now have a new municipal judge, Judge Kimberly Hodge and he plans to talk to her to see what can be done to retain these suspects in jail. Mr. Altman asked if the Town of Andrews still purchasing water from Georgetown County. McClary stated that the Town of Andrews has never purchased water from Georgetown County. The Town of Andrews is on record with SC DHEC as having some of the best quality of water in the state. The Town has three wells and each of them pump at least 400 gallons per minute.

Mayor McClary reviewed a slide with the citizens reviewing the Andrews Police jurisdiction area. It was announced that school starts Thursday in Georgetown County. Mayor McClary shared with the audience that the Town has a new master plan which address streetscaping along Main Street, trails and things now that will bring this town to life. The town now will have to go out and seek funding to make this master plan a reality. Several new businesses are relocating to Andrews to include Little Caesar's Pizza, Fitness Forum, Shedcor LLC. just to name a few. Lastly, he stressed the importance that we all come together and fight for the Georgetown County to relocate EMS services which is a critical resource back into the town limits. In closing Mayor McClary stated that he will send a letter to Georgetown County Administrator, Angela Christen and DOT Representatives requesting their presences at a forum much like the meeting tonight to address the concerns of the town of Andrews residents. Citizens were reminded to sign the sign up to receive an appointment to discuss their individual account

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Adjournment

Motion was made by Mayor Pro Tem Eddie Lee and seconded by Council Member Angela Anderson to adjourn the meeting at 8:07 p.m. Town Council Meeting minutes submitted by Town Clerk Chaconas Parson.