

## Frequently Asked Questions Funding Public Fire Protection

**Q:** What will this fee pay for?

**A:** Although this fee has often been called a “hydrant fee” in the past, the public fire protection fee will pay for much more than just the installation and maintenance of fire hydrants. Adequate fire protection requires installing pipes, pumps, water towers, which are larger than what is needed for everyday household use. Such pipes, pumps, etc. must be sized to provide the massive amounts of water needed to fight fires.

The Public Fire Protection item on your water bill helps pay for oversizing of pipes to allow more water flow, installation of water towers for storing water, oversized pumps to allow for the pressure needed to combat fires and the maintenance of water infrastructure and fire hydrants. This fee will not pay for any of the costs of operating the Fire Department – only costs related to the infrastructure that makes adequate water flow and pressure for fighting fires.

If the Utility did not invest the money required to pay for the oversizing of pipes, pumps, and other infrastructure, insurance premiums would likely rise and losses from fire could increase.

**Q:** Why must City Utilities customers pay for public fire protection?

**A:** Providing a reliable water supply for fire protection is an important function of our water utility. In fact, the very first public water systems were developed to fight fires. By shifting the fee to the Utility bill, all who benefit from fire protection share the burden of the additional costs associated with it. In years past, the responsibility was born only by those who paid property taxes. This new method of collecting associated costs is more equitable.

**Q:** How much will my bill go up?

**A:** Each residential water customer of City Utilities inside the Bluffton City limits will pay \$5.09 This will appear as a separate line item on your City Utilities bill. Homes or businesses that have larger water meters will pay more based on the size of the meter.

**Q:** What meters are charged for public fire protection?

**A:** The state law that allows municipally owned water utilities to apply the cost of public fire protection to its customers requires that the fee be applied to all water meters based on size and does not allow for exemptions or exceptions.

Meters placed on wells for the purpose of billing for sewer use are not charged for public fire protection because in these cases the properties are not customers of the water utility.

**Q: How has this cost been covered in the past?**

**A:** Previously the City of Bluffton funded the fee using money collected from property taxes and paid City Utilities for public fire protection. As a result of this ordinance, City Utilities customers will now pay for public fire protection directly to City Utilities.

**Q: Will my taxes will go down as a result of this?**

**A:** Moving the source of funding for public fire protection from the property tax bill to the water bill helps to accomplish two important goals. First, it helps ensure that everyone who benefits from the availability of public fire protection (including not-for-profit organizations) pays for the service. Second, it frees up tax dollars to support other Bluffton City services. This is important to offset tax caps and levy growth rates limitations implemented by the Indiana General Assembly.

**Q: Is this a cost that should be paid by the Fire Department and not Utility customers?**

**A:** This charge has nothing to do with the costs of operating the Bluffton Fire Department – City tax dollars pay for that. Public fire protection covers the costs that City Utilities incurs to be able to maintain the infrastructure of water mains and fire hydrants as well as deliver plenty of water at pressure necessary for fighting fires. Public fire protection is completely independent of any of the expenses incurred by the Fire Department in fighting fires.

**Q: How did this happen?**

**A:** This fee has been reviewed and approved by the Bluffton City Council. A revision to the to the water rate ordinance was published in the Bluffton News Banner. A Public Meeting on this ordinance change was held in open session during City Council meetings.

**Q: How much money does City Utilities need to collect for public fire protection each year?**

The cost for oversizing and maintaining the parts of the water production and distribution system that provide public fire protection is approximately \$370,000 dollars per year.

Bluffton's reliable water infrastructure, the quality of services from the Fire Department and the 911 emergency communication system, in combination, has earned Bluffton high marks from the Insurance Services Office (ISO). The rating saves Bluffton property owners significant dollars each year in insurance costs.

**Q: Will businesses and homes pay the same amount?**

**A:** The amount for each customer will be based on the size of the water meter that feeds the property. Almost all homes inside the City limits will pay a flat \$5.09 per month. Businesses and larger buildings require larger water meters and use more water, so they will pay more based on their water meter size. Also because the fee will be applied to water customers instead of property tax payers, all customers who benefit from public fire protection will contribute and share the costs appropriately.

**Q: Is this just another way for the Water Utility to fund deteriorating infrastructure replacement?**

**A:** No. This change will not provide the water utility with any additional revenue. This will provide the water utility with the same amount of money for public fire protection costs, but the money will be paid directly to the Utility from Utility customers rather than from tax payers.

**Q: Do any other cities make residents pay for fire protection?**

**A:** Many other cities in the region and around the state bill residents for public fire protection through their water bill.

**Q: I don't have a fire hydrant in front of my house. Why do I have to pay?**

**A:** Although you may not have a hydrant directly in front of your house, Bluffton's water system has been designed and built to provide you and your neighbors with fire protection

**Q: I have a fire hydrant near my house but I am not connected to City water. Will I have to pay?**

**A:** No. By state law this is a fee that City Utilities is only able to apply to customers of the water utility. If you do not have City water, you will not pay the fee. If you are inside the City limits – but not a City Utilities water customer - you will continue to receive public fire protection from the City of Bluffton

**Q:** If I don't get my water from City Utilities but I have a meter on my well for sewer billing purposes, will I pay the fee?

**A:** No. This is a fee that City Utilities can only apply to customers of the water utility. If you do not have City water, you will not pay the fee. If you are inside the City limits – but not a City Utilities water customer -- you will continue to receive public fire protection from the City of Bluffton.

**Q:** How did you decide how much the bill will be?

**A:** Indiana laws outline the method for deciding how much each water utility customer should pay for public fire protection. The cost is based on water meter size. The larger the water meter is, the higher the monthly fee.

**Q:** I have insurance on my house. Do I still have to pay the fee?

**A:** Having insurance doesn't guarantee you won't have a fire and it doesn't protect your neighborhood. City Utilities is committed to providing you with top quality public fire protection so that in case you do have a fire, it can be controlled quickly and property damage can be minimized. But public fire protection does come with a cost.

The combination of the quality of services from the Bluffton Fire Department, 911, and water infrastructure provided and maintained by City Utilities achieves high marks from the Insurance Services Office (ISO). The high rating helps reduce what you pay for your homeowner's insurance.

**Q:** If I don't pay my bill, will you add late fees on the fire protection part of the bill?

**A:** Yes. Late fees are applied to any part of the City Utilities water bill that is not paid by the due date.

**Q:** If I get a smaller water meter will amount I pay for public fire protection go down?

**A:** The size of the water meter you have is based on delivering the necessary amount of water at the required pressure to all of the fixtures inside your building. The water utility can review your water use history and needs, but generally, the meter sizing was reviewed at the time your building was constructed and is optimal for your needs. The meter size for your building cannot be changed without a review by the water utility and/or information furnished to us by a licensed plumber.

**Q:** **I get City water at property, but I don't directly receive a bill for water. I do receive a bill for sewer. Will I be charged the fire protection fee?**

**A:** If you do not directly receive a bill from City Utilities for drinking water, you will not receive a bill for public fire protection fee from City Utilities; however, you will may pay the fee indirectly. In the case you describe, it is likely that the owner of the complex is receiving the water bill for all of the units. The public fire protection fee will be applied by City Utilities to that bill. The owner may then decide if/how the additional cost will be allocated to the units.

**Q:** **Do I still have to pay this fee if my property is vacant?**

**A:** Yes. It is likely that you continue to pay homeowner's insurance on your home even though it is vacant. Likewise, public fire protection will be available even though your home is vacant, so the fee will continue to be charged, so long as you have water service from City Utilities

**Q:** **Do people in the City who get water from a well have to pay this fee?**

**A:** The fee will only be applied to properties that receive water, and thus a water bill, from Bluffton City Utilities.

**Q:** **Once I start paying this fee, does it mean that I can use a fire hydrant for anything I want whenever I want to?**

**A:** Only the Bluffton Fire Department and City Utilities Staff Members are authorized to use the hydrants at any time. Anyone else who wants to use a hydrant as a water source must obtain a permit and pay for the amount of water they use. Permit holders may be required to use only designated hydrants so as not to cause an inconvenience for other customers. Permits are also required so City Utilities can protect against contamination of the water system and improper operation of the hydrants.

**Q:** **If I have further questions about the fee that aren't answered here, who can I talk with?**

**A:** You may contact your City Council representative to express your concerns. Contact information for City Council members may be found on the City website at [www.blufftonindiana.net/city-council](http://www.blufftonindiana.net/city-council).