A Proposal to Revise the West Jackson County Utility District Residential Billing Rate System
Dear Mr. Stennis,

After the recent installation of my home’s water meter, West Jackson County Utility District (WJCUD) advised me of the newly revised water billing rate system. When I reviewed the new rate schedule and user charge ordinance, I found them to be thoroughly unacceptable. The West Jackson County Utility District residential billing rate system is unfair, includes excessive charges, and is confusing. It should be revised immediately.

First, I believe the WJCUD residential billing rate system to be very unfair. By studying the system, I found that the district had begun metering water before all residents had a meter installed (“User” 3). According to the WJCUD water rate schedule, residents whose meters have not yet been installed pay a flat rate for unlimited water usage, while metered customers pay a fee dependent on the amount of water used per month (“User” 2). This is blatantly unfair to metered residents because a metered household could use the same amount of water as an unmetered household but pay more per month for water usage. For example, the average
household uses about 300 gallons of water per day, or 9,125 gallons per month (“Water” 1). Based on the utility district’s residential billing rates, an unmetered household with an average rate of water usage would pay $25.75 per month, while a metered household with the same rate of water usage would pay $45.32 per month (“User” 2). Given that all meters will be installed by January of 2015 (Hannah), metered households with an average rate of water usage will pay almost $300 more between November of 2013 and January of 2015 than unmetered households with the same rate of water usage.

Additionally, the WJCUD residential billing rate system has excessive user charges. Compared to the previous utility provider in the district and utility providers in the surrounding areas, WJCUD has disproportionately high prices. As I have stated, for a metered household with average water usage, WJCUD charges $45.32 per month. The previous utility provider for the district, Coast Water Works, was a privately owned, profit-seeking company and only charged a flat rate of $25.75 per month for unlimited water (Tuttle). The current charge of $45.32 per month represents over a 75% increase. Similarly, WJCUD charges more for water than Ocean Springs Public Works (OSPW), Pascagoula Public Works (PPW), and the D’Iberville Water and Sewer Department (DWSD). For a household with average water usage, OSPW, PPW, and DWSD charge $22.59 (Faste), $25.78 (Kohl), and $27.37 (Reece), respectively.

WJCUD’s strangely excessive prices lead me to question what exactly its customers pay for in their monthly bills. The residential billing rate system’s section on user charges is very perplexing, however, and there is not a complete description of monthly charges. According to Article II, section 2 of WJCUD’s user charge ordinance, monthly user charges include
the costs of operation and maintenance (including replacement) of the public water works and sewage system, retirement of existing debt included herein, and repayment of any Drinking Water Systems Loans in accordance with the approved Utility Service Charges, included herein by reference… (“User” 2)

This description of user charges does not fully represent the monthly costs to the consumer and can be considered vague, at best. The residential billing rate system does not explain the existing debts or Drinking Water Systems Loans as “included herein” in the above quote suggests, nor does it discuss when the mysterious user charges will cease to be applied to customers’ monthly bills. In an interview with WJCUD’s manager, John Hannah, I asked him why the additional costs were not entirely defined or limited. He had no explanation.

The WJCUD billing rate system is confusing, as well. Usually, a utility company will have a simple, easy-to-follow price list with an obvious rate equation and price trend. Ocean Springs Public Works, for example, charges its customers $9.01 for the first 3,000 gallons of water and $1.94 per additional 1,000 gallons (Faste). WJCUD, however, has a long, complicated list of prices with no rate equation whatsoever, and while there is a trend of increasing user costs, it is irregular. According to its rate schedule, WJCUD charges customers $14.94 for the first 2,000 gallons of water (“User” 2). This may seem straightforward, but each 1,000-gallon increment afterward has a different price. For example, water from 4,000-5,000 gallons costs $4.63, water from 7,000-8,000 gallons costs $2.09, and water from 8,000-9,000 gallons costs $6.18 (“User” 2). When I asked Mr. Hannah about the haphazardness of the rates, he acknowledged that they were complicated and placed the blame on the previous manager’s lack of organization (Hannah). Whether Hannah’s predecessor had poor organizational skills or not,
it is no excuse for WJCUD’s lack of action on the subject, especially when there is such a simple solution.

A straightforward rate equation and a clarified rate schedule can be easily achieved by finding the mean value of the prices of all 1,000-gallon increments above 2,000 gallons. The mean value is attained by adding the price of each 1,000-gallon increment together and dividing by the number of 1,000-gallon increments. For WJCUD, the sum of all prices is $35.95 and the total number of 1,000-gallon increments is ten (“User” 2); therefore, the mean value is $3.60 per 1,000 gallons. The rate of $14.94 for the first 2,000 gallons and $3.60 per additional 1,000 gallons is much more simplified than the current price list and is easier for customers to understand.

For many local residents, West Jackson County Utility District’s current residential billing rate system has made hard economic times even more difficult. Now is not the time to be hiding costs and presenting convoluted information, but this is exactly what WJCUD is doing in its residential billing rate system. The system is unfair to metered residents in the district, excessive and disproportionate in its consumer costs, limited in its description of monthly user charges, and unclear in its price listings. With these faults in mind, I urge the West Jackson County Utility District to revise the current residential billing rate system immediately.

Sincerely,

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Nancy Faste is one of the workers at Ocean Springs Public Works. I interviewed her because she knows the price that Ocean Springs Public Works charges its customers for water per month. She told me that customers pay $9.01 for the first 3,000 gallons, and $1.94 per additional 1,000 gallons of water per month.


John Hannah is the manager of West Jackson County Utility District. I interviewed him because he is in charge of the District’s operations. He told me that all water meters in the district are expected to be installed by January 2015, he did not know why the user charge ordinance did not explain the debt costs or limit their collection, and he agreed that the price list was complicated, but blamed it on the previous manager.


Bonnie Kohl is one of the workers at Pascagoula Public Works. I interviewed her because she knows the price that Pascagoula Public Works charges its customers for water per month. She told me that customers pay $5.20 for the first 3,000 gallons and $2.94 for each additional 1,000 gallons of water used per month.


Carol Reece is the Utility Billing Supervisor at the D’Iberville Water and Sewer Department. I interviewed her because she knows the price that D’Iberville Water and Sewer Department charges its customers for water per month. She sent me an attachment that had the rate list for water in the city of D’Iberville.


William Tuttle is my father. I interviewed him because he has paid our monthly water bill for over 18 years. He told me that he paid $25.75 per month for unlimited water while he was a Coast Water Works customer.


A list of district ordinances for West Jackson County regarding rules for water meter maintenance and payment of water bills. Also includes a rate list.

In the US, people use water so much in everyday life that they do not realize how much they use. Water is used for taking showers, washing dishes, flushing toilets, and many other purposes. It is also used locally for swimming pools, etc. Knowing how much water one uses in a given time period is very important, so it is necessary to keep up with water usage through monthly bills, etc.