Del Norte Triplicate

NEWS

When the Sewer Bill Becomes a Property-Tax Bill

By Linda Sutter October 2, 2026

CRESCENT CITY, CA (MPG) - Crescent City residents are beginning to feel the effects of new water and sewer rates that took effect July 1, 2026. But what happens when a homeowner simply cannot afford the bill? The answer deserves attention, particularly from seniors, people living on fixed incomes and lower-income homeowners.

Under the City's new rates, a residential customer inside Crescent City pays a sewer charge of $98.06 per month. A household with a standard ¾-inch water meter pays another $34.90 monthly base water charge, plus $2.26 for every 100 cubic feet of water used. That means a homeowner receiving both services starts at $132.96 per month before water usage is added. That's nearly $1,600 per year before paying for the water actually consumed.

Crescent City's Residential Water Service Discontinuation Policy recognizes the financial difficulties some residents may face. The policy was adopted in 2020 following passage of Senate Bill 998, California's Water Shutoff Protection Act. The City's resolution begins by recognizing California's declaration that every human being has a right to safe, clean, affordable and accessible water. It also establishes protections for qualifying low-income customers and procedures for payment arrangements before residential water service is disconnected.

But there is another side of the utility bill residents need to understand: sewer charges.

The City has historically treated delinquent sewer-only accounts differently because there is no City water service to shut off. City records describe customers receiving only sewer service from Crescent City as "Sewer Only" accounts. When those accounts become delinquent, the City has a procedure allowing the unpaid sewer balance to be placed on the property owner's property-tax roll after the required notice and City Council proceedings. The City states this plainly on its current Finance Department website: "If you have a sewer-only account, delinquent bills will be added to your property tax bill once per year."

The City has actually used this process. Records show delinquent sewer balances have been presented to the City Council at public hearings. Following Council approval, qualifying delinquent sewer charges are sent to the County Auditor and placed on the property-tax roll. Historically, the City has also added a 6 percent administrative charge.

There is another situation homeowners should understand. During discussions surrounding the City's 2020 water shutoff policy, the question arose about what happens when someone pays the water portion of a City utility bill but fails to pay the sewer portion. City records demonstrate an important distinction: California law provides specific protections against residential water shutoffs, while delinquent sewer charges can be handled through the City's separate collection procedures. In other words, keeping the water portion of the bill current does not necessarily make an unpaid sewer balance disappear. A qualifying delinquent sewer balance may ultimately become a special assessment against the property.

That distinction becomes increasingly important as utility rates rise. The City's own records show the financial problem is not hypothetical. Crescent City reports that 323 residential water accounts were disconnected for nonpayment in 2025, following 341 in 2024 and 407 in 2023. Those numbers occurred before the July 2026 rate structure took effect.

For lower-income households, the consequences can be significant. Families already struggling with food, electricity, gasoline, medication, rent, mortgages and property taxes now have to absorb higher utility costs for essential services. Crescent City's policy recognizes certain low-income households and provides qualifying residential water customers with payment arrangements and other protections. Residents experiencing financial hardship should contact the City before allowing an account to become seriously delinquent and ask specifically about payment arrangements and any low-income protections for which they qualify.

Homeowners should also understand what can happen when a qualifying sewer debt is transferred to the property-tax roll. An unpaid sewer balance does not mean someone's home will immediately be sold because they missed a sewer payment. The City must first follow the applicable notice, hearing and assessment procedures. Once properly imposed, however, the delinquent sewer charge becomes a special assessment on the property-tax roll. If the resulting property taxes remain unpaid, the property can eventually enter California's tax-default process. After the applicable statutory procedures and redemption period, tax-defaulted property can ultimately become subject to sale.

That potential outcome deserves public attention, particularly when rates for essential services are increasing. Water and sewer systems have to be maintained and paid for, but so do the people who depend upon them. When government substantially increases the cost of essential utilities, the discussion should not end with how much money the system needs to operate. It should also include a serious question about affordability: Can the people being asked to finance the system afford to pay the bill?