

Sunday, July 26, 2009

## All wet City admits it screwed up on water meter covers

By Mark Woolsey

The City of Atlanta is looking at a potential hotline to deal with the issue of ill-fitting and frequently busted water meter covers, and one councilman is asking constituents to snap pictures of the offending covers, which he then forwards to the Department of Watershed Management with pointed questions about when repairs can be expected.

Additionally, residents are raising questions about how quickly the department is responding to persistent leaks.

At issue is the city's \$35 million replacement and retrofit of more than 150,000 water meters. The goal was to put in devices that could be read automatically, a move that was supposed to save the city a million bucks or so a year in meter-reading and administrative expenses.

But Midtown resident Mark Edge says he noticed that when the covers were installed about a year and a half ago, replacing those that had been in place for decades, they were breaking after just months, creating a hazard to vehicular and pedestrian traffic alike. Edge and others say the ill fit runs anywhere from a quarter-inch to a half-inch, causing the covers to rest unsteadily on a recessed lip of metal just below ground.

Put weight on them, and they snap and flip.

"It's a metaphor for the way the city runs things," says Edge. "There's never any money to do things, and when there is, they waste it. The city was retrofitting what was there, so they should have known the dimensions."

Yes, we screwed up, says Janet Ward, spokeswoman for the water department, and it's not the fault of contractor K and V Automation.

"The city thought all of the meter boxes were the same size. They're not. They're different sizes, so they didn't fit," says Ward. "We are in the process of identifying those meters with improperly fitting lids so we can change them out."



Midtown resident Mark Edge points out two water meter boxes with broken covers. Weeds grow in one.

**"The city thought all of the meter boxes were the same size. They're not. They're different sizes, so they didn't fit."**—Janet Ward, spokeswoman for the Department of Watershed Management, on \$35 million project

Ward says a number of options are on the table to expedite reporting and dealing with cover problems, including a hotline.

Some aggrieved residents complain that replacement covers have broken multiple times, but Ward says those are not the permanent replacements. Despite reports that K and V has been anywhere from a week to a month behind schedule, she expects an on-time finish for the project at the end of July.

An internal city audit reported that more than 75 percent of the new meters had sizing and other problems in February of 2008.

Dave McDonald, a clinical social worker who lives in the Old Fourth Ward, says he's noticed "dozens" of broken covers during regular walks from his home to the Little Five Points area. He wrote to his councilman, Kwanaa Hall, to complain about the water department, including its handling of a persistent water leak.

"I think we have a lack of leadership and an entrenched system of incompetence, and it's been tolerated rather than corrected," he says.

For his part, Hall is not happy about the covers.

"We are going to do a survey of every broken meter we see, and we're going to send it to the water department and see what they do," he says. "We're going to take to the streets and talk to our constituents, and they'll send us pictures and we'll deliver them to the water department to see what their timeline is for getting these things repaired."

Hall says he's gotten "at least a hundred" complaints related to the water department since he's been in office.

Sally Flocks, head of the Atlanta pedestrian advocacy group PEDS, says she e-mailed Mayor Shirley Franklin on July 8, asking whether K and V would stop installing the wrong-sized covers and install proper replacements, but has gotten no response.

"I'm very disappointed," says Flocks, who recounts a growing number of injuries from people stepping into holes created by the busted meters. Among the walking wounded is a woman Flocks says called her office to complain about dropping a foot and a half into a broken meter box near the Fox Theatre, banging up her feet, legs and hand.

## **THE CITY TOO LEAKY TO CARE**

Then there are those constant leaks. McDonald says he and his partner had been watching one on Lake Avenue for two years or more, now finally fixed.

"We reported the leak multiple times, and we got the usual 'We'll take care of it,'" says MacDonald. He says a crew made repairs after calls were made to Councilman Hall and to the mayor's office, threatening to get local TV news crews on the case.

Amy Wikman, who says she noticed water coming from under the street near her business off Chattahoochee Avenue, called water officials "several dozen" times, she says.

“I would call the emergency line and they would say it’s not an emergency. Then I’d call the billing department, and they’d tell me to call emergency,” she says. “Eventually, someone would tell me they were going to come out and fix it, but nobody ever did.”

So Wikman gave up. She says the problem still persists: sometimes a trickle, sometimes more like a running faucet.

Ward tells the Sunday Paper that the water department could not find either of these leaks.

Watershed Management has quickly jumped on a number of leaks, including those involved in some recent well-publicized media cases. And Ward says the department has made a quantum leap since the days of private provider United Water.

“We are very good at responding to leaks,” she says. “We have the figures. We try to get to everything in between 10 and 15 days. We are repairing about 750 leaks a month. That’s what happens when a system gets old. United was repairing 750 or so a year. That’s not to say something won’t fall through the cracks sometimes.”

To which Wikman responds: “This is not an enormous problem, but with all the problems Atlanta has had with water issues and the drought, you’d think they’d jump on any leak promptly.” **SP**

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## Comments

This project was not in any way required by the consent decrees. It has increased leakage in a time of shortage and displaced needed system maintenance (old meters are not being repaired) on the DWM agenda.

If the project worked out perfectly, there would have been annual savings of about a million dollars on an initial investment of 35 million. That’s less than a 3% annual return on investment. The initial cost was borrowed with a bond issue that cost over 6% in interest payments. Thus, the project could have never paid for itself. It was planned as a big waste of ratepayers’ money, and then screwed up so as to become a colossal waste of that money.

It isn’t just the new leaks and misfit covers. An alarming number of the new meters don’t work at all. Mine doesn’t. The one that it replaced worked fine.

**jim**

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