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Additional sewer bills from Harrisburg unnerve East Shore municipalities

By **MARY KLAUS**, *The Patriot-News*

March 26, 2010, 11:32PM

Municipalities that use Harrisburg's sewer treatment plant are looking at back bills ranging from \$50,000 to \$1 million after the city determined it had been undercharging for the past three years. The recently received bills — and demand that they be paid within 60 days — are leaving area officials wondering how to pay and concerned about the impact on residents.

"We got a letter with a bill for \$102,768.75 in alleged arrears," said Jim Armbruster, Penbrook borough manager. "That bill is almost half of what we normally pay in a year. This hurts," Armbruster said. "This is a huge amount of money for a little borough like us. This is more than a mill increase in tax terms. We can't just take it out of petty cash."

In addition to processing city sewage, Harrisburg Authority's plant on South Cameron Street handles sewage from Paxtang, Penbrook and Steelton boroughs and Susquehanna Twp. and portions of Swatara and Lower Paxton townships. But it appears only Swatara Twp. and Steelton have been paying the correct, higher, rate.

The letters from M. Antonia Baum, city Bureau of Operations and Revenue director, says the bills for 2007, 2008 and 2009 were too low because of an "oversight" caused by "a turnover of personnel."

Baum referred questions to the mayor's office, which referred calls to Michael Holmes, Mayor Linda Thompson's chief of staff. Holmes did not return repeated telephone calls Thursday and Friday seeking comments for this story.

The honesty of a Susquehanna official alerted the city to the possible problem.

Pam Winters, manger of the township's sewer authority, said she suspected an error when Jerry Miller, Swatara Twp. Sewer Authority director, said that Swatara Twp. every quarter pays around \$48 per single family home, many times referred to as equivalent dwelling units or EDUs. But "Susquehanna Twp. was paying \$42 per EDU," Winters said. "I said 'what's wrong here?' I couldn't just say that's too bad, just go home and not say anything. I'm not that way."

Susquehanna Twp. Authority sent a letter and then a follow-up letter when the first didn't get a reply, Winters said. After the second letter, the city's Bureau of Operations and Revenue looked at the issue and said the city's 2006 ordinance did indeed set the rates at \$48.20 per EDU per quarter and sent out higher bills.

Turns out a mistake of a little over \$6 per quarter when multiplied by hundreds of homes adds up to big money fast.

"They want payment in 60 days," Winters said, "but \$713,101 is a ton of money. This is a real hardship. Our board will meet on April 6 and discuss it. I have no idea what the board will do."

She said she did not know how much payment of this bill could add to residents' sewer bills.

Winters said the city charged the township the right amount for commercial rates but not residential. "It's interesting that no auditor or bookkeeper caught this," she said. "I guess the other municipalities might say 'thanks a lot, Susquehanna.' Our feeling is the longer it went on, the worse it would become."

Lower Paxton Twp. likely received the largest bill from the city, but officials there aren't talking about it yet. William Weaver, director of the township Sewer Department, and George Wolfe, township manager, confirmed that their municipality received such a letter. Neither would reveal the amount of the bill.