

From the Billing Department



From time to time we all have a question on just about all of our bills, whether it be our credit card bill, our telephone bill, or our utility bill.

If there is a charge on your bill you don't understand, or if you are unsure if there is an extra cost associated with some additional services you would like to obtain from our Department, call our Customer Service Department for assistance.

If the question can't be answered quickly, our Supervisor — Customer Relations is there to assist you in obtaining an answer to your particular question.

If you have trouble paying your utility

bill, you may qualify for assistance from one of the local assistance providers. For complete qualifications and application information –

- Contact St. Louis County Social Services at 218-749-7137.
- Contact the local Community / Citizen's Action Council (AEOA) at 218-749-2912.
- Contact the Salvation Army at 218-741-1889 .

These organizations may also provide budget counseling.

Payment plans are available with our Department for customers who need some additional time to take care of their obligations to pay for utilities used. The Virginia Utilities will attempt to work with customers in formulating a mutually agreeable payment plan.

Customers must contact the Department's Supervisor—Customer Relations before the date of proposed disconnection to allow time to set up an agreement.

SERVICE CHARGES—WHAT IS THEIR PURPOSE?

This is a question that many customers have asked. The monthly service charge on your bill is, in part, to cover costs of having service at your location. It is not only to cover the cost of your service, but is your share of the total costs for operation and maintenance of the system—electric, gas, water, or steam. Some refer to it as a charge for basic service.

Money is needed to keep distribution lines maintained and to maintain the Power Plant. The service charge for the different commodities supplied varies as the fixed costs to provide each commodity are different.

DEPOSIT FOR SERVICE

In conjunction with handling accounts for the purpose of billing customers for utilities used, deposits may be required in accordance with the following policy.

A deposit in an amount approximately equal to two times the highest month's bill at the location based on the previous year's consumption (for a year when premises was occupied), shall be required prior to an account being put into a customer's name, connection to the utility system, and /or receiving service. In cases where excessive Door Hangers (Notices) have been delivered to a property or service has been disconnected due to non-payment, the Utility may at their discretion require a deposit three times the highest month's bill (applies to both tenants and property owners).

If a customer has purchased the property under a Contract for Deed, the customer will be treated as a tenant as it relates to posting a deposit. Once the customer holds Title to the property (must be recorded), and the account is in good standing, the customer may request a refund of the posted deposit.

The deposit requirement for utility service may be waived providing the service account is in the name of the property owner (transfer of title has occurred). A property owner who has been granted a waiver for the required deposit may be required to post a deposit if their account appears on the disconnect list more than two times in any twelve-month period.

A property owner (who has been granted a deposit waiver) may guarantee payment on a tenant's account by completing and signing Guarantee of Payment form. The guarantee of payment can only be withdrawn upon written request and receipt of necessary deposit. Guarantees are not transferable from tenant to tenant (each tenant must provide a deposit or submit the guarantee from the property owner).

All deposits shall bear interest at the rate established by the Minnesota Department of Commerce (rate is announced by December 15th of each year for all or part of the subsequent year). Interest will be credited to each account on December 31. At the time of termination, deposit interest will be calculated and applied to the account as of the termination date. If there is a balance at the time of termination, the deposit will be applied to the customer's account and any remaining amount will be refunded once all obligations to the utility have been discharged. Deposits are non-transferable from one customer to another or from one account to another and are refundable only to the original applicant or applicant's designee providing proper identification.



JULY 2017

The VPU office will be closed on the following dates:

- July 4, 2017
- September 4, 2017



The VPU Customer Newsletter is published quarterly by the City of Virginia, Minnesota Department of Public Utilities.

DPU — QUICK NOTES

KNOW THE SMELL OF NATURAL GAS—BE SAFE!
If there is a faint smell of natural gas, call VPU at 218-748-7540.
If in doubt, leave the building immediately & call 9-1-1.

STREET LIGHT OUT?

If you notice a street light that is burnt out or flickering, please call VPU at 748-7540 so that we may get it fixed and keep our streets bright!

Before You Dig, Contact Gopher State One Call

Dial 1 8-1-1 or 800-252-1166 or www.gopherstateonecall.org

CHECK YOUR WALL PATCHES

If you have steam heat in your home, or an abandoned steam line to your home....

Periodically check the wall patch where the steam enters your building for leaks.

If you have a vacant property please check property often, as damage can occur quickly...

Call 748-7540 with questions

An Informational Newsletter for Customers of the Department of Public Utilities, Virginia, Minnesota



WE TAKE THE GOOD WITH THE BAD

When it comes to our customers making payment for services, the Utility has well established policies and procedures which provide guidelines for fair treatment of all customers. Our policies follow the State's Cold Weather Rule which require utilities to work with customers who are having difficulty paying their bills. There is, however, the misperception that the Cold Weather Rule does not allow us to turn people's power off in the winter. That is simply not the case. Essentially, if a customer can't pay, we have to work with them. But conversely, they have to work with us. You'd be surprised how many customers believe they can coast through winter without making payments. And when their power gets disconnected they get upset to say the least.

We all pay the cost of lax collections efforts. That's why we are vigilant. But, we find that we must balance that vigilance against the idea that a public utility needs to go the extra mile to help those in need. We are proud of our efforts in this area and we are ever so thankful for those 90-95% of our customers who are able to pay their bills on a timely basis month in and month out.

That said, there still are a good number of our customers working through some tough financial situations. Many of these receive some kind of heating assistance from the various local agencies that provide it. One such customer lost his job this past winter and the balance on his account got bigger and bigger. He would come in to make payment arrangements but he had no real ability to know when he was going to have money coming in. He was frustrated to the point of almost being defeated. But we could tell he and his wife were trying and they simply needed time to sort things out. We gave them that time and kept their power on. Fortunately, he landed a job and these days there is light at the end of the tunnel for them.

On the other hand, there's a small cadre of customers who have this indignant, self-righteous, entitlement mentality. Not just the young adults, though. It's all ages. We get accused of all kinds of things. They threaten legal action, they call us racists or sexists, they secretly record conversations, they yell into the phone, they use vulgar language, and yet they show little appreciation for what we may have done for them. I will admit I've gotten a bit jaded over the 12 years I've been dealing with this crowd so it's difficult for me to empathize with them. But I learned long ago, you get more bees with honey than with vinegar.

Technically, 20 days after providing a delinquent notice we can cut power without notice. But we choose to provide a notice as one last warning and a few more days. After that we even go so far as to give a little courtesy call, in hopes we can avoid turning power off. On one such courtesy call our staff person said, "You need to be here in the morning or your power will be turned off at 11:00." The next day no one showed and so the power went off. At 1:30 the person came in and when asked, "Why didn't you come in this morning?" he replied, "I just got up, so it's still morning to me." Wow. All in a day's work, I guess.