

Public Information Programs

Applicability

Public information programs can be an effective outreach tool to inform customers about water efficiency and ways they can conserve water. This BMP should be incorporated into all other BMPs as a way to reach your targeted audience regarding other water efficiency or water conservation measures the water system is undertaking. Outreach opportunities include direct interaction with the public, water use histories on bills, and a water efficiency/conservation webpage on the system's website. This BMP is intended for all water systems ("utility") with residential customers.

Description

Under this BMP, utilities would implement a public information program to promote water efficiency measures, including other BMPs being implemented and water efficiency-related benefits. The program should include various aspects of the following:

- Use the customers' bills as outreach tools.
 - Water use for the last billing period compared to the same period the year before, including a bar graph.
 - Use the bill to advertise any other programs (e.g. rebate or incentive programs) or restrictions underway.
 - Direct people to your website for more water efficiency information, if you include the website in a prominent place on the bill.
- Directly interact with the public.
 - Provide speakers for community groups.
 - Have booths with staff and exhibits at community festivals and events.
 - Co-sponsor adult education and training programs on water efficiency and conservation topics (e.g. water efficient landscaping, making your own rain barrel, and how to do your own home water audit). These programs could be done in conjunction with local gardening clubs, soil and water conservation districts, homeowners' associations and similar organizations.
- Utility In-House Media
 - Maintain a regularly updated water efficiency webpage as part of the utility's website. Include any water efficiency rebate or incentive programs, watering restrictions, and links for more information on water efficiency topics.
 - Record "on hold" messages with conservation information for utility or municipal phone lines.
 - Produce brochures, handouts and giveaways that can be distributed at public events and at public buildings.

- Traditional/Social Media
 - Produce television and radio spots for larger water efficiency or conservation measures the utility is undertaking.
 - Develop and maintain a regularly updated water efficiency Facebook page, MySpace page, Twitter feed, postings to YouTube, etc.

Implementation

Although utilities will choose to implement different components of this BMP, implementation should consist of at least the following:

- Determine if the current billing system allows for water use history for the last billing period compared to the same period the previous year and whether it can add graphs. Determine if bills can be updated with other outreach information. If this information cannot be added to the bill, determine if a new billing system may be required. Determine if it is fiscally viable to implement this BMP.
- Create a program for direct interaction with the general public. At a minimum, this should include speaking with community groups and exhibiting at community festivals.
- Create and maintain a regularly updated water efficiency and conservation webpage as part of the utility's website.
- Create a plan for disseminating information about drought status accompanied by appropriate conservation and efficiency messages.
- Produce brochures, handouts and giveaways that can be distributed at public events and at public buildings.

Schedule

- Research if the current billing system allows for water use history for the last billing period compared to the same period last year and whether it can add graphs. Research if bills can be updated with other outreach information. If the bills cannot be altered, research billing options that will allow for these changes. If there are no fiscal barriers, this change should be completed within the first 12 months.
- In the first three months, begin planning your public events. Research local festivals and inquire about participating. Create a water efficiency display and publications for these events. Remember to include other BMPs that your water system is implementing. Contact local organizations about collaborating to facilitate water efficiency related workshops. Begin public engagement within the first six months and continue throughout the year.
- In the first six months, plan a water efficiency webpage as part of the utility's website. Remember to include other BMPs that your water system is implementing. If necessary, locate contractors who may be interested in bidding for this project. Within the first 12 months, create and launch the webpage. Update the webpage at least every three months.

- Within the first six months, determine whether the utility and/or municipal phone systems have recorded messages or music for phone calls placed on hold. If so, record several water efficiency messages that play while on hold. Remember to include other BMPs that the water system is implementing. This project should be completed within 12 months and updated every three months or sooner if needed.
- Within the first six months, engage in social media outlets such as creation of a Facebook or MySpace page, sending Twitter feeds or creation of YouTube videos.

Scope

To accomplish this BMP, the utility should do the following:

- If fiscally possible, within 12 months of implementing the program, develop and implement a plan to make customers' bills an outreach tool by providing water use history for the last billing period compared to the same period the previous year.
- Within 12 months of implementing this program, the direct public engagement aspect should be fully implemented. The utility should strive for at least four public speaking engagements and/or public events per year.
- Within 12 months of implementing this program, the webpage, social media and recorded messages should be fully implemented. The utility should strive to update these at least every three months (Some information such as water status or drought restrictions should be implemented much more often, especially during drought).

Documentation

Utilities will differ in what aspects of this BMP they implement. To track progress of this BMP, the utility should gather and have available the following documentation:

- Document the research for the billing system, including estimates on replacing billing software with software that provides water use histories, graphs and water efficiency information directly on the bill if the current system does not have the ability to add them.
- The number of public speaking engagements that utility staff has attended, including the estimated number of people in attendance.
- The number of public events that utility staff has attended with a display or exhibit. These should include the estimated number of people in attendance.
- A list of brochures and handouts created for or used to provide information to the general public about water efficiency, water efficiency benefits, other BMPs that the system is currently undertaking and/or other water efficiency related topics.
- A completed water efficiency webpage and any social media projects, schedule of past updates and changes made during the updates.

- The number of phone lines that have water efficiency “hold” messages, and the content of the messages, the schedule of past updates and the content of the changes.

Determination of Water Savings

Water savings for public information programs are difficult to quantify and therefore estimated savings are not included in this BMP. This BMP, however, is critical to the success of the other BMPs undertaken, as it serves as the promotional and educational portion of those BMPs.

Cost-effectiveness

A true cost-effectiveness analysis cannot be determined without a measure of water savings. This BMP, however, is an integral part of many best management practices, so it should be considered foundational to a successful water conservation program. In addition, by implementing this BMP, the utility will enhance its public image and increase customer goodwill.

For comments or questions regarding the Public Information Program BMP, please contact the water efficiency specialist of the Water Supply Planning Branch at 919-707-9009.

References:

- California Urban Water Council, Memorandum of Understanding Regarding Urban Water Conservation in California, as Amended Sept. 14, 2011.
- Texas Water Development Board report 362, Water Conservation Best Management Practices Guide, November 2004.

Case Studies

Direct Interaction with the General Public

Greensboro, North Carolina

As early as 1993, water supply vulnerabilities in Greensboro increased the city’s need for a water demand strategy, water supply augmentation, water restrictions and a comprehensive public educational program. Greensboro created and has maintained a substantial public education program by using a variety of approaches to educate the public.

The Greensboro Water Resources Department disseminates public information in several ways. To spread the conservation message, they distribute promotional items at various special events in the community. Several brochures covering topics such as how to have a WaterWise Home, WaterWise Landscaping and WaterWise Lawn Care have been created. Customers typically receive public education materials through their water bills, at presentations, workshops and by visiting the customer service informational kiosk. The Greensboro contact center provides customers with advice on how to fix a leaky toilet, report environmental issues such as pollution, flooding and storm drain blockage. In addition, new customers receive an information packet that contains various resources.

Multiple awareness campaigns have been produced through the collaborative efforts established between Greensboro and High Point. The Greensboro Water Resources Department also collaborates with the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service in Guilford County on several projects to address issues affecting the community. Throughout the year, the cooperative extension service holds Carolina Yards and Neighborhood Program workshops for residents that deal with issues such as proper planting techniques, water conservation and protecting water quality. In addition, the agency manages the rain barrel distribution program the city promotes.

For more information on the Greensboro Water Conservation Program, please see the following link at <http://www.greensboro-nc.gov/index.aspx?page=2259>.

Cary, North Carolina

During non-drought times, Cary primarily communicates with residents through its monthly utility newsletter (BUD), the town's website, Cary TV 11 Conservation Corner, and the distribution of brochures at venues such as Earth Day at Spring Daze. Displays, print ads in the local newspaper, and postcards are used primarily for annual campaigns, such as Beat the Peak and Fix a Leak Week. In its recent Water Conservation Survey of 2011, the town asked customers how they would prefer to receive water conservation information. The customers preferred getting information through the utility newsletter by a large margin (83.2 percent). Other important sources were direct mail via postcards (67.5 percent), Cary's email list service (60.2 percent), Cary's website (59.3 percent), Cary News (55.5 percent), and homeowners' associations (52.5 percent).

In addition to its public outreach, Cary works with local businesses and community groups to help communicate its water conservation message whenever possible. Providing information to customers from many sources increases awareness of the many water conservation programs the town offers. For example, making sure that plumbers and home improvement stores know about the availability of high-efficiency rebates or free toilet dye tablets, for example, is an important point of contact for customers. Providing information at local garden centers and through irrigation contractors are other opportunities for businesses and water purveyors to work together to share conservation messages.

For more information on the Cary Water Conservation Program, go to <http://www.townofcary.org/Departments/Public Works and Utilities/Conservation/Water Conservation.htm>.

Using the Customers' Bills as Outreach Tools

Durham, North Carolina

The Durham Department of Water Management wanted to be able to show customers how much water they were using as compared to previous billing cycles. While usage was shown on each bill (bi-monthly for residential customers), there was no bill-to-bill point of comparison. When the city converted from the mainframe billing system to the Enterprise Resource Planning System (ERP) based billing system in January 2009, one of the major selling points was the ability to provide billing history on the bill itself. Water management has received numerous compliments from customers for providing this useful information.

In addition to the usage history, there is a small box just under the usage graph for newsworthy information. Staff has used the box to announce the implementation of year round watering restrictions, information about the tiered rate structure and notices of drought stages. All messaging directs customers to the DurhamSavesWater.org website for additional information. Used in concert with notification in the Citizens' Newsletter and other city-wide public information tools, both the usage graph and the information box have been received positively by Durham's customers, providing them the necessary tools to take ownership of their water usage.

Durham has seen a relatively flat demand during the last few years even with an increase in customers. City staff gives partial credit to information provided in the customers' bills, since it was used as a public outreach tool. The graphs on the water bill encourage on-going attention to usage and customers pay special attention during the summer months. Seasonal usage has not spiked as much in the post-drought years as had been anticipated, thanks in part to the usage graphs and the odd-even watering schedule. The decreasing number of seasonal watering violations is also a result of keeping the message in front of customers. Durham attributes the relatively flat demand to a number of factors, such as best management practices instituted by the city during the last few years.

For more information on the Durham's Water Conservation Program, go to http://www.durhamnc.gov/departments/wm/water_cons.cfm. For an example of Durham's water bill with a consumption graph, please see below.

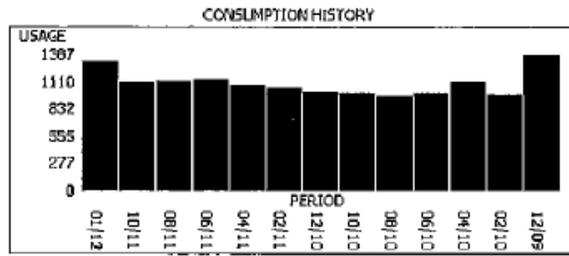


City of Durham
 101 City Hall Plaza
 Durham, NC 27701
 919-560-1200
 www.durhamnc.gov

City of Durham Utility Bill

Account Number	Customer Name	Service Location	Apt/Unit	Billing Date
999999999999	Doe, John	0000 No Name St		01/12/2012

PREVIOUS BILL AMOUNT	\$96.77
PAYMENTS 11/28/2011	\$96.77 CR
ADJUSTMENTS	\$0.00
BALANCE BROUGHT FORWARD	\$0.00
WATER USAGE INSIDE CITY	\$31.78
WATER SERVICE FEE 5/8" MTR	\$11.12
SEWER USAGE INSIDE CITY	\$47.17
SEWER SERVICE FEE	\$12.98



Balance Forward Due Per Previous Bill	\$.00
Total Current Charges Due By 02/08/2012	\$103.05
Total Amount Due	\$103.05

Parcel ID	Account Type	IA Amount/ERU's "see back"
999999	Residential	99999

Meter Number	Previous Read Date	Present Read Date	Number of Days	Previous Reading	Present Reading	Usage in hundred cubic feet	Usage equivalent in gallons
99999999	10/28/2011	12/28/2011	61	54998	56323	1325	9911

Important: Please return this portion with your payment so that the return address shows in the envelope window. If paying in person, bring this bill.



Bill Number	Bill Date	Account Number	Charge Description	Due Date	Amount Due
99999999	01/12/2012	999999999999	Past Due Balance		\$.00
			Current Charges	02/08/2011	\$103.05
A late payment fee of 1% will be added to all unpaid charges after 02/08/2012.					
Total Amount Due					\$103.05
Enter Payment Amount					

00006042012309999999800000103050

SL: 0000 NO NAME ST
 DOE, JOHN
 0000 NO NAME ST
 DURHAM, NC 27701

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