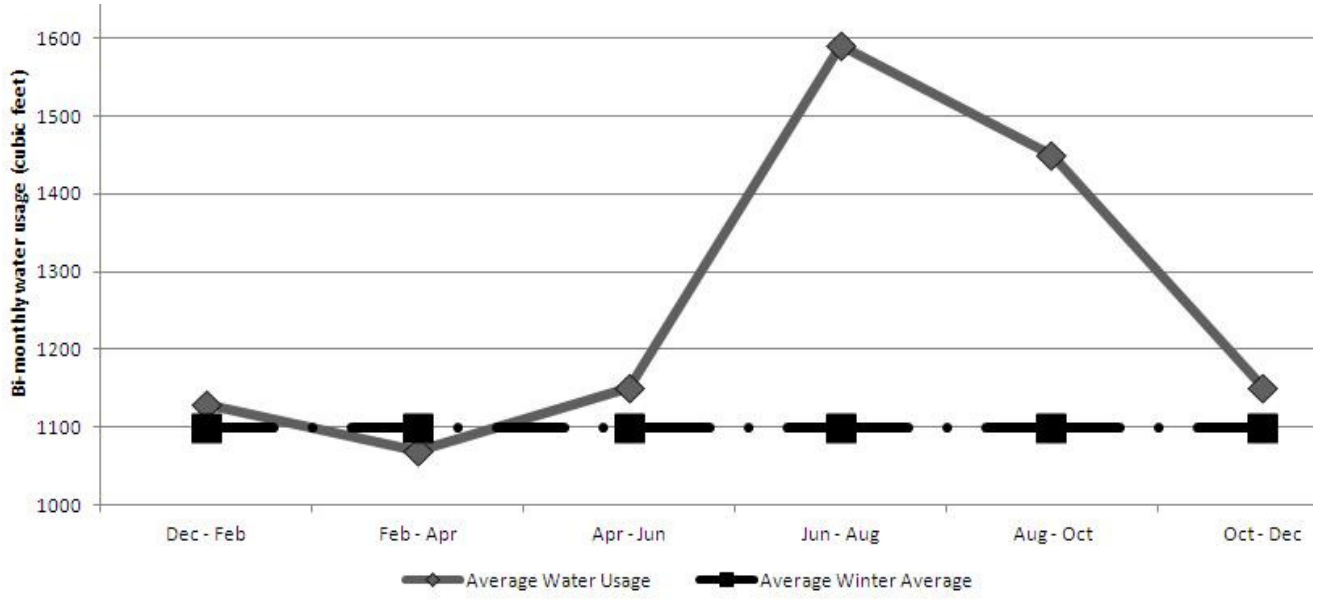
Winter Average: A Look at How Sewer Fees are Calculated

In 2010, the City changed the way that sewer bills were calculated for residential customers, moving from a flat fee that all customers paid regardless of how much water they were putting into the sewer system to a fee that is primarily based on each residence's water usage. The City continues to receive many questions about the new billing process.

The City calculates sewer rates for residential customers based on the actual water that is used in a home from December 15 through April 15 (called the winter average) each year. Once the winter average is calculated, this total is used to set each customer's sewer fees for the next year.

- Winter Average is defined as the average residential customer's water usage for the two bi-monthly billing periods that start in mid-December and end in mid-April.
- Winter Average best reflects the actual water usage that ends up entering the sewer system and at the wastewater treatment plant for further processing. Other water usage months (mid-April to mid-December) most likely include irrigation and other outdoor uses that are not included in the waste stream processed by the wastewater treatment plant. For instance, if you water your lawn and garden or wash your car during the summer, this water usage is not entering the sewer system.
- Winter Average is only applied to residential customer accounts. All other customer classifications (apartments, commercial buildings, etc.) are charged based on actual water usage year round.
- Residential customers can request reassessment of their sewer billing. Reassessment is usually triggered by, but not limited to, either two consecutive billing cycles during June through December that have water consumption below the calculated winter average or when leaks have been identified and fixed during the time period that is used to calculate winter averaging (December through April).
- Prior to winter averaging, all customers were paying a fixed amount for their sewer bill that represented the average annual usage of all residential customers combined. However, 67 percent of all residential customers use water at an average or below-average rate, while 33 percent have above-average water usage. With the old fee structure, this meant that customers who were using water at an average or below-average rate were helping to pay for the customers who had above-average water usage. The winter average fee structure means that customers now pay a more equitable rate that reflects the actual cost of service for each individual residence.
- The City encourages all customers to reduce their utility bill through actively conserving water. Active conservation methods may include, but are not limited to, low-flow water devices on toilets and showers and/or limiting the amount of water used outdoors (i.e. washing cars, watering lawns, etc.). To obtain further ideas for conservation, please reference the following web sites:

  - http://www.ci.st-helens.or.us/media/cityforms/Water_conservation_document_2.pdf
  - http://www.portlandonline.com/water/index.cfm?c=51031&
  - http://www.oregon.gov/OWRD/WR/drought_conservation.shtml#Residential_Water_Users
  - http://www.cbs.state.or.us/bcd/pdf/0990.pdf
  - http://www.waterpikecoflow.com/water-conservation-tips.html?gclid=CJjb__7Q06YCFQIBbAod02waHQ



This graph illustrates the water usage patterns of all residential customers based on the most recent winter averaging calculations. The gray line represents the average water consumption year-round, while the black line represents the average water consumption used to calculate sewer bills.