We are here to help. As we focus on addressing every customer’s individual billing concerns, we want to make sure you have the latest information available regarding high water bills and what measures the City is putting in place to improve oversight of its billing practices. Here are some answers to recent questions around this subject, including helpful web links and how to contact customer service about your account.

Has the City been overcharging its customers for water?
The City has several processes in place to ensure all customers are charged appropriately for the services received. However, a recent review of some bills demonstrated that one meter reader incorrectly read about 350 meters. Those customers have been identified and have either received or soon will receive a refund.

My bill is higher than normal and I haven't been contacted. Why is my bill so high?
We have heard from customers throughout San Diego who believe there has been an unexplainable recent spike in their water bill. We are working diligently with each individual customer to determine what happened, address these concerns and correct any billing inaccuracies that may have occurred.

Our first step is to determine what mistakes could have been made on our end. Then, we review the usage history, as there may be a variety of other reasons for customers to be experiencing higher than usual bills.

Some factors that may have contributed to higher water bills (specificially in the fall of 2017) include:

- In November 2017, we had a one-time 70-day billing cycle, versus the traditional 60-day billing cycle, which contributed to more days being included in one billing cycle.
- A rate increase of 6.9 percent approved by the City Council was implemented in August 2017.
- Unidentified water leaks in homes and irrigation systems.
- Warmer temperatures and dry conditions leading to increased water use (following a wetter than usual season last year).
- New landscaping or pool installations.

Why do customers have to pay $66 for a meter controversy test when there are known billing inaccuracies?
If there has been a spike in your water bill and we are not able to determine the cause through standard procedure, the next step is the meter controversy test to determine if there is something wrong with the meter. Pending resolution of the billing inaccuracies, the meter controversy test fee will be waived.

Some customers who saw large spikes in their bill (and standard procedure and also potentially an outside plumber could not find any issues with water usage and the meter) have already paid for the meter controversy test. If you paid for the test on or after July 1, 2017 you will be refunded your $66. The City has already been reviewing these cases and sending refund instructions and checks to the affected customers. Please contact us if you paid for the test since July and have not received a notification about your refund.
What is the City doing to prevent water billing mistakes from happening again?
To ensure the accuracy of future bills, the City is implementing stricter accountability measures in the Public Utilities Department. Every water meter in the City of San Diego will be reread by April 10, 2018, and new employee oversight procedures have been put in place. New procedures include:

- Requiring Public Utilities Department supervisors to personally sign off on daily reports from meter readers.
- Adding security protocols to ensure that only designated staff have the ability to input data.
- Improving automated alerts that flag unusual spikes in water usage.
- Adding a second review of meter reads to ensure accuracy.
- Including an informational insert in water bills on how customers can read their own meters and track their water use.

In January 2018 the City Auditor began a planned audit of the Department’s Customer Service Division. Following the recent billing concerns, this audit will now include a review of billing procedures to determine if any additional changes need to be made to ensure the accuracy of customers’ bills. This audit has been expedited and is expected to be completed in the spring.

Could the new smart meters the City is rolling out be causing the spikes in our water bills?  
So far the billing errors have not been linked to the new Advanced Metering Infrastructure, also known as smart meters. However, the currently underway audit will determine what, if any, role the City’s implementation and use of new smart meter technology may have played in billing inaccuracies.

While the City plans on replacing all 250,000 meters with smart meters by 2020, there are currently only 15,000 smart meters in use citywide. The smart meters benefit customers by providing online daily detailed water usage information and better tools to conserve water. They also improve the efficiency of operations, reduce costs and eliminate human error in reading meters.

In addition, we will be closely working with smart meter manufacturers to ensure accuracy and operational integrity. Any input or findings identified by the manufacturers will be included in our citywide audit.

You say there was human error in recent meter reads—how do I know that my meter is actually being read and my usage is accurately accounted for?
We will be re-reading all 250,000 meters in the city by April 10, 2018 to ensure that we are accurately accounting for our customers’ water usage. Spot checks will also take place to doubly confirm the accuracy of these reads. During the review period, we will be putting a door hanger on the door of each single family residence once we have read your meter. If for some reason your meter is inaccessible, the meter reader will indicate that on the door hanger and you will get an estimated read based on your previous usage during that time period. We will then want to follow up to determine how to make your meter more accessible for future reads.
Can I check my water meter myself?
Yes. Information on how to read your meter and how to check for leaks can be found at www.sandiego.gov/water/rates and on page 4.

Smart meters are widely used across the nation. We are reaching out to a handful of these cities to inquire if they have encountered any difficulties in rolling out their systems. This will be part of our comprehensive audit.

How can my billing concerns be addressed when it is so difficult to get through to a Customer Service Representative when I call?
We are committed to addressing each individual's billing concern. The City is temporarily increasing its number of Customer Service Representatives to shorten wait times and more thoroughly address billing concerns.

How do I contact Customer Service?
You can contact customer service at (619) 515-3500 or customercare@sandiego.gov.
A Customer Service Representative will work individually with you to address your concerns. Due to higher than normal call volumes, some wait times can be long. We are temporarily adding additional Customer Service Representatives to help reduce or minimize these wait times.

My case is still unresolved and I cannot afford my payments after these unexplained spikes in my bill—what do I do?
The majority of the customer complaints that have been documented through the City of San Diego Public Utilities Department Customer Service Representatives have taken place in the fall of 2017.

Until our audits are completed, if you have experienced an unexplained water spike which doubled your usual consumption and you have formally registered this concern with a City Customer Service Representative, you will be allowed to pay your normal consumption bill, using the May/June 2017 billing cycle. You will not be penalized for what would appear to be an underpayment and you will not be at risk of having your water services cut off. Customer Service Representatives have been directed to work with customers to “normalize” their bill to usage consistent with spring 2017 until these Department audits are complete.

What can I do to decrease my water usage?
The City offers a free residential survey program where Public Utilities staff visits your property to check for leaks and help you make a plan for monitoring your water consumption.

There are also a number of water conservation rebates available to apply for, including water pressure reduction valves and rain barrels. Find out more about these programs by visiting www.wastenowater.org or calling 619-533-7485. Given an increased interest in having a home water audit conducted, the City is ramping up the number of staff trained and available to make home inspection visits.

For low-income customers who qualify for a $100 credit on their bills, the City offers the H2O SD program. More information on this program can be found at www.sandiego.gov/water.
Is Your Bill Unusually High?

Here’s What To Do:
It can happen. You open your Public Utilities bill and it seems much higher than it has been before. It is important to know that there are three main reasons why this can occur:

1. An error occurred when reading your meter.
2. You have a leak on your property.
3. You used more water than usual.

An Error Occurred When Reading Your Meter
While the Public Utilities Department has a meter reading accuracy rate of more than 99.5 percent, errors do occur. If you don’t have a leak and you haven’t used more water lately, it could be that your most recent meter read was incorrect.

You Have a Leak On Your Property
This happens quite often and even a seemingly small leak can cause a huge increase in your bill. It might be a leaking toilet or a problem with your irrigation system.

To check for a non-irrigation system leak you will need to find your water meter (Figure 1). It is generally located near the curb in front of your home or place of business in a direct line with the main outside faucet. It is housed in a concrete box usually marked “water.” Carefully remove the lid by using a tool such as a large screwdriver. Insert the tool into one of the holes and pry the lid off. Check the area around the meter to make sure there are no harmful insects or other animals.

Then, turn all water-using appliances off so that no water is being used anywhere in the house. Check the position of the meter dial and wait. If after 15 minutes the dials haven’t moved, congratulations! You have a watertight home. But, if the dials have moved, start checking hose connections, faucets and toilets for water leaks. If you have everything turned off and are sure the toilets and connections aren’t leaking, yet the dials are still turning, you may have a hidden leak in an underground pipe. If this is the case, you may need to call a plumber for assistance.

You Used More Water Than Usual
This is the most common reason for a higher than normal bill. Perhaps you had house guests, you refilled a swimming pool, or put in some new landscaping which required watering. Maybe a son or daughter moved back home for the summer from college. Also, most customers use more water when we get hot weather. If you have an unusually high bill, the first thing to do is to try and figure a logical reason for it.

The Public Utilities Department has lots of information online which can help you understand your bill and even help you lower your water usage. Visit www.sandiego.gov/water for information about:

- Water and sewer rates;
- Water Conservation programs;
- How to reduce your bill and much, much more.

Water and money are both precious resources. Armed with all this information, you will be better prepared to conserve both!

The City of San Diego offers water conservation services, including its Residential Water Survey, Multi-Family Survey, Commercial Survey and Water-Wise Business Survey programs to assist customers in understanding their water use. These free programs are available to property owners and tenants located within the City of San Diego Public Utilities Department’s service area. To learn more about available programs, or speak to a Customer Service Representative about your account, please call 619-515-3500, or email water@sandiego.gov.