

Suburbs would get soaked by water-rate hike too

Emanuel's proposed increases, which would double average Chicago household bills, also mean up to 90% jumps for 130 communities served by city-supplied lake water

By John Byrne and Hal Dardick, Tribune reporters

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The ripple effects of Chicago Mayor [Rahm Emanuel](#)'s plan to hike water rates are spreading quickly into far-flung suburbs.

Residents and businesses in about 130 area suburbs and subdivisions that rely on city-supplied Lake Michigan water will also be hit by big rate hikes that Emanuel wants to impose on city dwellers to overhaul the water delivery system, the mayor acknowledged Friday.

Emanuel was silent about the suburban impact earlier this week when he released a 2012 budget that included a series of large water- and sewer-rate increases that would double costs for the average city household by 2015.

The largest portion of that increase is a 90 percent jump in the water rate. If the City Council approves, that rate hike will also be passed along to the suburbs.

What's more, local sewer charges typically are calculated as a percentage of water bills, meaning both are likely to go up in a big way. In Chicago, Emanuel's plan means the combined water-sewer bill for a typical family household will more than double.

The prospect infuriated [David Johnson](#), a longtime resident of Naperville, which buys its water indirectly from Chicago through the DuPage Water Commission.

"The city of Chicago has always been predatory on the suburbs," Johnson complained. "But they really have a stranglehold on our water supply, so it is inevitable they are going to use that to their advantage and our disadvantage."

Naperville City Manager Doug Krieger predicted the increase would lead to "millions of dollars coming from Naperville residents to fix a Chicago problem." Krieger said the water rates paid by Naperville should be based on what it costs Chicago to deliver water "and we should not be penalized for their failure to maintain their infrastructure."

In southwest suburban New Lenox, Mayor Tim Baldermann said he sympathized with Chicago's need to improve infrastructure and understood that his suburb, as a purchaser of city water,

should be called upon to pay its "fair share" of that.

That said, Baldermann expressed wariness about being gouged.

"We are entitled to an accurate and complete accounting of where every penny is going and how much money has been raised," said Baldermann. "Chicago has a major budget shortfall that has nothing to do with water. I don't want any of our money going to offset any of that."

Mayor Michael Gresk, of Wheaton, was more stoic about the potential increases, noting that Chicago had its suburban customers over a barrel.

"Where else are we going to get water?" asked Gresk. "You could get indignant, but the other side of it is, where are you going to go?"

In his budget, Emanuel laid out a four-year series of rate increases which would hike the annual water and sewer bill for the average unmetered single-family home in the city from \$450 this year to \$920 in 2015. The mayor said the increase will accelerate the pace of desperately needed repairs to the city's century-old system of pipes, sewers and pumping stations.

Emanuel, who was President [Barack Obama](#)'s chief of staff when the [White House](#) pushed through its first economic stimulus plan in 2009, has sought to spin the rate hike as a way to bankroll a kind of local stimulus plan.

"If we do the right type of — in my view — investment in the city's future, 18,000 workers will go to work over the next decade, replacing a thousand miles of waterline, water main, 750 miles of sewer, 140,000 catch basins," Emanuel said Friday. "Eighteen-hundred people a year in Chicago, building our infrastructure, our most precious resource."

The job estimates cited by the mayor are confusing because they appear to imply the rate hikes would finance 18,000 new jobs in Chicago. But the administration acknowledged the number of additional jobs at any one time would only total one-tenth of that.

The dimensions of the rate proposal shocked many Chicago residents, one reason why Emanuel appeared to be trying to soften the blow by emphasizing what he termed "the good news" during an appearance Friday at the site of a water main repair project in [North Lawndale](#).

"Nearly half the cost of the water and the street repair will be (borne) by the suburban people who rely on the system," Emanuel said at the site of a water main repair project in [North Lawndale](#). "Chicago residents themselves won't be bearing that cost."

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