How to Pass a (Mostly) Painless Rate Increase
A Strategic Communications and Outreach Approach
Our Vision: To be leaders and trusted stewards of the environment focused on service, collaboration, innovation, financial responsibility.
Wake-up Call

A single 48” water line feeds our entire south system, serving 60,000 accounts.

In January 2016, it sprung a leak.
Our Initial Reaction...

Ohh Sh*t
Crisis Narrowly Averted

1. Temporary Fix
2. Rapid Crisis Planning
3. Activation of Regional EOC
4. Final Repair
Perfect Storm

- Aging Infrastructure
- Insufficient Past Rate Increases
- Decreasing Consumption
- Increasing supply & maintenance costs

*Without more investment, things get worse, never better.*
Research says...

Only 21% of people believe utility bills are fair.

People think infrastructure needs repair, but only 30% want to pay for it.

The most dissatisfied or pessimistic people will be the ones to show up to your town hall meeting.
The Bright Side?

Parents, those on the “left,” and those active on social media are more receptive to utility messages.

• **Hint:** Get on social media…

• **Caveat:** …but only if you have the resources to manage it.

When customers see you as a leader or environmental steward, they’re more willing to pay for rate increases.

• **Hint:** Make this messaging a priority **before** your rate increase.
Our Approach

1. Evaluate assets
2. Examine new rate strategies & structure
3. Solicit input from stakeholders
4. Communicate new rates using best practices
This is what I envisioned...
Here’s what actually happened.
Soliciting Stakeholder Input

• County Commissioners (Governing Body)

• City Managers for all jurisdictions in our service area
Soliciting Stakeholder Input

Five-Year Planning Committee
(Community Leaders, Economic Development Pros, Elected Officials)

- Year-long process
- Rate plan alternatives
- Voting to support actions
Communicating New Rates

Plan before you communicate, and get to know your audience…

1. Message Matrix
2. Flexible Timeline
3. Communication Plan for EACH Stakeholder Group
Communicating New Rates

Traditional Media Relations

- Press release
- Calls to reporters
- Interviews
Communicating New Rates

Online Communication

- New website section (FAQs, outreach materials, online rate calculator)

More helpful than I ever anticipated

Property Type: Single Family Residential

Meter Size: 5/8"

Quarterly Volume: hundred cubic feet (CCF)

Get Rates
Communicating New Rates

**Online Communication** – Use Google Analytics & Heat Mapping to see how users interact with website and ID problems.

For more information, you can download a copy of our 2018 Water & Sewer Rates [1.15 Mb (PDF)]. To learn more about our five-year rate plan and planned infrastructure investments, download our presentation "Investing in Your Water and Sewer System" [PDF].

You can also download our 2016 Rate Schedule [PDF].

For a list of other fees and charges, download our [Auxiliary Fee Schedule (PDF)].

2018 Rate Increase Frequently Asked Questions.

- How much will my water and sewer rates increase in 2018?
- I own a business. My rate increase is larger. Why?
- How do Montgomery County rates compare to other local water utilities?
- What options do customers have to reduce the impact of rate increases?
- Why do we need a rate increase? Why is it important?
Communicating New Rates

Customer Relations

- Meetings with our Top 50 Customers
- Public Meetings in all jurisdictions
- Direct mail to anyone with ≥ 1” meters
- Email to all customers
- Bill Insert

Social media was very minimal.
LESSONS LEARNED

Start Early. Start NOW.

Start a conversation early with your governing body, before asking them to support a rate increase.

Tell your story now and at every opportunity.
LESSONS LEARNED

It’s Your Message. Own It.

Keep it in house.
Don’t outsource your message.
Take care of your customers.
LESSONS LEARNED

Focus on Service First

Meet their needs before you ask them to meet yours. Otherwise, passing rates will be painful. (e.g., Meter Decrease Policy, Talking Points for Staff)
LESSONS LEARNED

Simplify, Simplify, Simplify

Messages should be:

- Clear
- Specific
- Appropriate detail
- Free of jargon

(Don’t forget emotion!)
Questions?

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