

Guest Editorial

Vertical File

Combined billing brings efficiency

By Mark Clark
Mayor

For a number of years, the Board of Mayor and Aldermen has discussed the possibility of combining the utility billing systems of the Fayetteville Electric System, the Fayetteville Gas System, and the Fayetteville Water and Sewer System. The goal of such a move would be to provide "one stop shopping" and make Fayetteville utilities more user-friendly for the establishment of accounts for new customers and for monthly meter reading and payments.

I congratulate the city's aldermen for voting unanimously on Aug. 14 to support this plan. I firmly believe this new system, to be implemented for the April 2002 billing cycle, is right for Fayetteville.

In October, 2000, I appointed a Utilities Task Force. Each utility designated members who were subsequently named to this task force. The Utilities Task Force was chartered with finding the best solution for a combined billing system. I would be remiss if I didn't thank these task force members for their hard work. Additionally, the Board of Mayor and Aldermen is grateful to Sharon Rollins, of the University of Tennessee Municipal Technical Advisory Service (MTAS), for her guidance and counsel to the Utilities Task Force.

In November, 2000, members of the task force visited Springfield to view firsthand a combined utility billing system. The task force then conducted a survey of customers who had established new accounts with Fayetteville utilities between July 1 and Dec. 31, 2000. A resounding 78% of respondents stated they would have preferred one location for establishing their new accounts, and 65% of respondents stated they would prefer a single, combined monthly bill for all their Fayetteville utility accounts.

In June, 2001, after surveying potential vendors for the computer software and hardware required for a combined billing system, the Utilities Task Force recommended a plan and cost estimate to the Board of Mayor and Aldermen. Based on this recommendation, and after a work session with all city utility boards, the Board of Mayor and Aldermen voted on Aug. 14th to approve the plan. Further, the City Board appropriated funds for all computer hardware required, leaving each utility only to pay for required employee training and software installation and maintenance.

So, what does this mean to you, the customer? First of all, in April, 2002, you will receive a single, combined bill for your Fayetteville Electric System, Fayetteville

Gas System, and Fayetteville Water and Sewer System services. This will allow you the convenience of paying once each month for all utility services. You can write a single check, or you can arrange for an electronic bank draft. It's as easy as that!

So, you ask, where will you go to establish a new account or to pay your combined bill? Your choice: Fayetteville Electric System, Fayetteville Gas System, or Fayetteville Water and Sewer System. Each utility will be prepared to accept a combined payment and establish new accounts (except for new construction, which requires technical guidelines for the reliability of the system and safety of the customer).

What if your single, combined bill seems a bit too much to pay all at once? The Utilities Task Force continues to work on a number of details, one of which is a provision for anyone to pay each utility bill separately, just like we're all doing currently. Obviously, the goal of the new system is to eventually have everyone make a single monthly payment. However, a transition period is natural, and it will be your choice whether you pay all your utility bills at one time or separately.

Customers will also be able to arrange for "levelized" billing to avoid the months with higher than normal bills. Fayetteville utilities offer such payment plans currently, and this provision will remain in the new system.

Many, many more details continue to be worked by the Utilities Task Force. However, lucky for you, the ratepayer and taxpayer, the plan is moving forward. Please understand that for the foreseeable future, the Fayetteville Electric System, the Fayetteville Gas System, and the Fayetteville Water and Sewer System will all continue to exist as separate entities. Eventually, a move may be made to combine these into a single, consolidated utility system, but not at this time. The current move is simply intended to bring efficiency to account establishment and monthly billing and payment.

Again, I congratulate the aldermen for supporting this bold initiative. Clearly, we will have some hurdles to cross as the new system is implemented; however, the combined utility billing system will result in tremendous future cost savings for Fayetteville. I'm excited and proud to serve with elected officials who are indeed working for Fayetteville's future.

Let me again thank the members of the Utilities Task Force for their work to date and for their continuing work to make this new system a reality.

In the coming months, look for additional information about our new, combined utility billing system!