

Utility Bill Deferral**Report Purpose**

To seek Council approval on providing Strathcona County utility billing customers the option to defer utility payments for three months due to financial burdens caused by COVID-19.

Recommendation

THAT providing utility customers with an option to defer utility bill payments for up to three months with no penalties be approved.

Our Prioritized Strategic Goals

Goal 1 - Build strong communities to support the diverse needs of residents

Goal 6 - Provide facilities and services that are available and accessible to residents

Goal 8 - Foster an environment for safe communities

Report

With the provincial announcement of utility bill deferrals and the encouragement of municipalities to do the same several municipalities are enacting an approach to provide some financial flexibility.

We have historically offered payment plan assistance for those facing individual financial hardship. We have worked with Family and Community Services as an additional resource to assist residents.

Given the current circumstances we have the opportunity to broaden our approach.

- Offer utility bill payment deferral via an application process to all retail accounts (residents and businesses)
- All late fees and charges will be waived for 90 days, customers will still be responsible for their usage
- Bills will continue to be issued monthly, so customers can track the total amount owing
- Utility payments by the pre-authorized debit payment plan can be deferred by calling Customer Billing to have them temporarily suspended
- We encourage residents who can pay their bill to continue to do so
- Upon the conclusion of the 90-day deferral all accounts with an outstanding balance will be migrated to a payback plan over the next six months

Financial and resourcing impacts

- Monthly revenue for Utilities is in the order of \$4million to \$5million
- There is a total of 29,000 active utility accounts; 6,500 are currently on a pre-authorized debit plan
- Additional staffing will be required to administer this payback plan

Other Impacts: Cash flow; budget

Policy: n/a

Legislative/Legal: Bylaw 39-2014: Waste Management, Bylaw 16-2016: Water System, Bylaw 28-2017: Sewer and Wastewater System Bylaw

Interdepartmental: Corporate Finance; Utilities

Master Plan/Framework: n/a

Communication Plan

- Instructions via bill messages and web page
- Information release and post to social media
- Auto payment plan deferrals will take time based on current staffing level