

Press Release from Towns County Water & Sewerage Authority regarding City of Hiawassee's Sewer Moratorium

The Towns County Water & Sewerage Authority (the Water Authority) has been providing high-quality water services to the people of Towns County for decades. The Water Authority purchases water from the City of Hiawassee and pumps that water to customers throughout its infrastructure serving unincorporated parts of the County. The Water Authority and City have worked together cooperatively for years. Then, on February 24, 2020, the City of Hiawassee enacted a moratorium on sewer services for new customers that receive their water from the Water Authority. Why? Because the City was having trouble collecting sewer fees from some of its customers who received water from the Water Authority.

In other words, simply because some of the City's sewer customers weren't paying their bills on time, the City of Hiawassee is completely refusing to provide sewer services to new customers if the new customers get their water from the Water Authority infrastructure. The only exception to the announced moratorium is if the Water Authority surrenders that water customer's account to the City so that the City gets the water fees even if the water passes through the infrastructure installed and maintained by the Water Authority. In essence, the City is holding hostage any new Water Authority customers, obstructing future growth in our County solely to increase City water fees.

Meanwhile, the Water Authority remains committed to serving all of its customers, whether they receive sewer services from the City or not. In fact, the Water Authority is willing to completely solve the City's billing problem of being unable to "force" sewer customers to pay their sewer bills. How? For customers that get their water from the Water Authority and their sewer from the City, the Water Authority will handle all the billing for both water and sewer. Each month, the Water Authority will bill its customers for water as usual and will add to the bill whatever the customer owes the City for sewer. Then the Water Authority will cut a check to the City each month for all the sewer fees charged to the Water Authority's customers. This way, the City gets paid in full for its sewer services every month, completely solving the City's fee-collection problem. And customers will only have to worry about paying one bill. Of course, if a customer refuses to pay, then the Water Authority can still cut off water services until the bill has been paid.

In Georgia, local governments are required to have a Service Delivery Strategy to provide quality public services efficiently. For water service, it simply doesn't make sense to run two sets of water lines throughout the County or to create a checkerboard pattern of customers—some who receive water from the Water Authority, and others who pay the City for water received through the Water Authority lines. What makes sense is to provide water service based on geographic location and existing infrastructure. Other than within the current service areas of Hiawassee and Young Harris, the existing water infrastructure is owned and maintained by the Water Authority. The Water Authority is in the process of negotiating a new agreement with the City that will define the service delivery areas for the Water Authority and the City in a sensible way based on geographic location, not based on whether the customer is new or has a commercial account.

The Water Authority believes that providing water service based on geographic location is the best way to reduce costs while maintaining quality service. The Water Authority remains willing to help the City solve its sewer collection problem and hopes to reach a new agreement with the City defining the service delivery areas and the wholesale water rate so that the Water Authority and the City can continue working together to provide high-quality water throughout the County.

Please address any questions to Mr. Eddy Corn 706-896-3451, General Counsel for the Water Authority.