



Some residents of St. Albert who have opted out of getting their smart water meters installed are having their water cut off by the City. Resident Jerry and Jeanne Manegre show a letter they received that outlines a termination of their water service.

Photo credit: CHRIS COLBOURNE/St. Albert Gazette

CITY HALL

Residents in standoff with city over water meter

Former alderman one of several residents to have water shut off for refusing new smart meter

BY JENNIFER HENDERSON NOV 2, 2018

Two St. Albert residents are taking the city to court after city workers shut off their water because they refused to let contractors install a smart water meter in their home.

Jerry Manegre, a former city alderman, and his wife Jeanne had their water services cut off around noon Wednesday.

“I’m concerned not only for Jeanne and I, but for other members of our family who live in St. Albert and who have been receiving the same notices as we have,” said Manegre, who received a letter from the city Oct. 3 warning the upgrade of city meters is mandatory and refusal could result in disruption to water service and a fine of up to \$1,000.

On Thursday, Manegre submitted an application for judicial review to the Court of Queens Bench, which will be heard Nov. 8 at 10 a.m. Until then, the Manegres will be without water in their home and will need to rely on their family in the community.

They expect the next week to be challenging in terms of practising proper hygiene without a water supply, and hope the Nov. 8 review will result in a permanent injunction from the court to prevent the water meter from ever being installed in their home, as well as an order to restore their water service.

The smart water meters are part of a \$6.4-million, city-wide meter replacement program. The meters use a radiofrequency (RF) transmitter to send data, which has been a source of controversy for some homeowners since their roll-out began last December. Although Health Canada's exposure code for RF energy deems the amount coming from the meter to be well within safe parameters, some residents worry about the potential health impacts from RF waves, as well as potential privacy concerns since the meters track water usage throughout the day and can show a pattern of when people are at home.

Shortly after the roll-out began, the city started exploring a paid opt-out program for residents living RF-free lifestyles or who simply do not want the presence of an RF transmitter, which attaches to the outside of their homes. The meter itself goes inside the home.

Council ultimately decided against providing an opt-out option.

Kevin Cole, director of utilities for the city, said nine homes have had their water service halted in the last month, with six residents being cut off around two weeks ago. All but one customer during that period had their water turned back on within 24 hours.

The second round of cut-offs came on Halloween, when three homes, including the Manegres, had their water halted. Cole said of the three, one home has had service restored, they have been in contact with another and the third home they have been unable to reach.

Overall, he said, residents will have been contacted a minimum of eight times – at least five times by Neptune Technology Group, which is handling the replacement program, and at least three times by the city to warn them they need to install the meters – before service is stopped.

Cole said the city has to stop service to residents who refuse the meter because council voted against an opt-out program and the utility department will no longer be able to use the old meters to take a reading. He noted every resident needs to get a smart meter in their home because the city will not be running two systems to test the meters at the same time.

In April, Coun. Sheena Hughes brought forward a motion to create an opt-out system for the smart water meters, but the motion failed in a 3-3 tie with Coun. Ray Watkins absent from the vote.

At that meeting, Hughes said she expected a "significant backlash" from residents if council decided not to proceed with the opt-out program, and Coun. Wes Brodhead said he felt residents have "the right to make up their own minds about what is healthy and what is not."

Mayor Cathy Heron, Coun. Jacquie Hansen and Coun. Natalie Joly voted against the first reading, arguing one water meter program would be more efficient than two.

“I really don’t think we need to be running two programs, when one program is going to be very effective,” said Hansen said in April.

“I think as a society, we’re moving toward smart technology, and this is our opportunity to get on board.”

Joly said in April that going forward with the opt-out program would set a precedent for the future.

Heron pointed to the installation of smart water meters in other communities, noting that for a “smart city,” St. Albert has been slow to implement smart meters.