

# TOWN OF NORTH WILKESBORO

## CUSTOMER SERVICE POLICY



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## AUTHORITY

The enactment of these policies requires the approval of the Town Board. As fee schedules, rates and other specific policies are updated, it will be the responsibility of the Town Manager to make sure the policy manual is revised.

The Town Manager or his/her designee (the Finance Officer) is authorized as the hearing or grievance officer for customers. He/She is authorized to hear concerns and complaints, settle disagreements and reconnect any customer disconnected for non-payment while the concern is investigated, if he/she deems necessary. Hearings are addressed on page 11.

All grievances must be heard and addressed by the hearing officer prior to an item appearing before the Town Board.

## **OVERVIEW**

Employees of the Town have been empowered and well-trained to use this policy to deliver high quality service to customers. Employees are expected to deal with each decision with empathy and understanding, listening carefully to the needs and requirements of individual customers. Ultimately, the Town Manager accepts responsibility as the final authority on this policy.

## **APPLICATION OF THIS POLICY**

1. This policy applies to every customer or applicant for utility service. Copies of this policy are available at Town Hall and on the Town's website [www.north-wilkesboro.com](http://www.north-wilkesboro.com).
2. This policy may be revised, amended, supplemented, or otherwise changed from time-to-time by action of the Board of Commissioners. Customers are encouraged to seek answers to any questions by calling the Town offices.
3. These policies are part of all oral and written agreements for providing and receiving utility service from the Town.

## **CUSTOMER'S RESPONSIBILITY**

1. Allow utility department personnel access to property to setup and maintain service.
2. Pay bills by the due date shown on each monthly bill. If customers do not receive a bill, it is their responsibility to contact the Town to get the amount of their bill.
3. Notify the utility department if there is someone in the household who is either chronically or seriously ill, or on a life support system, where they need consistent water supply. Notification shall include verification in writing from a medical doctor and be updated in January of each year.
4. Notify the utility department of questions or complaints about service.
5. The Town provides utility service for the sole use and convenience of the premises under agreement. The customer will ensure that utility service is not given or resold to a neighbor or tenant. Violation of this policy will be cause for immediate disconnection of service.

## **CUSTOMER'S RIGHTS**

1. The customer has a right to request, free of charge, historic billings and usage information.
2. If the customer is dissatisfied with their utility usage, a recheck of the meter reading may be requested. A fee of \$25.00 will be charged if the customer requests more than three (3) rechecks within a twelve (12) month period during the fiscal year. However, if this service discloses that the meter was read in error, no charge will be made.
3. If a utility department employee cannot find any reason for usage changes, the customer may request a meter test. A fee of \$50 will be charged if the customer requests more than one (1) test within a twelve (12) month period and if the meter is within accepted tolerances (plus or minus 2%). The customer has the right to the results of the test. If the meter is found to be faulty, no charge will be made.
4. The customer has a right to request a review of any complaint according to the grievance procedure.

## **TOWN'S RESPONSIBILITY**

1. To provide prompt, professional and courteous service.
2. To apply the customer's deposit to their account after the final bill reading and final bill calculations are made.
3. To provide and explain rate schedules, how meters are read, and other additional, reasonable information.
4. To provide historic billing and usage information when requested by the customer.
5. To provide conservation information.
6. To provide equal treatment to all customers.
7. To operate the utility system in an efficient manner.

## **TOWN'S RIGHTS**

1. To access the Town's facilities at any time.
2. To receive notices of changes in address, telephone number, status of utility service, or problems with utility service immediately.
3. To receive timely payment for services delivered to a customer.
4. To discontinue service for non-payment, returned check, or returned automatic bank draft payment.
5. To take legal action regarding equipment tampering or financial delinquencies.

## **ESTABLISHING SERVICE**

## **OFFICE AND SERVICE HOURS**

1. The Town's Finance Department is located at 832 Main Street in the North Wilkesboro Town Hall. Town Hall is open from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm, Monday through Friday. Routine and regular service work will be performed during these hours, except for holidays and during inclement weather.
2. Emergency restoration work is performed 24 hours a day, seven (7) days a week. For after hours utility emergencies, please call 336-838-3158.
3. For customer convenience, the Town has an after hours depository located in front of Town Hall. Billing stubs should be enclosed with payment to insure the appropriate credit on the account. In addition, the Town offers an online bill payment service from its website, [www.north-wilkesboro.com](http://www.north-wilkesboro.com).

## REQUEST FOR SERVICE

1. Original application for service – Any customer requesting service will complete an application and agreement for service. The customer will provide.
  - Driver's License or other Government issued Photo ID
  - Telephone Number
  - Social Security Number
  - Customers that sign up for rental property will need to provide a copy of their lease. The person's name signing up for water must be on the lease.

The Town recognizes that an application for utility service will only establish credit for the husband and wife if the account is processed in both names. In all other situations, credit will be established for only the customer signing the application. In situations where utility service expenses on the same account are shared by two or more people (other than husband or wife), then the signatures and required application information for all persons desiring to have credit established with the Town shall be included on the original application for service. Service will not be established until the applicant(s) appear in person at Town Hall with the required photo identification.

2. Account Deposit – A customer will pay an initial deposit (see fee schedule) to begin utility service. Deposits are non-interest bearing.
3. Non-residential Accounts – Accounts established for non-residential service will require the same information as listed above and a signature by an officer of the corporation, or a responsible person (owner, manager, etc.). That person accepts the personal responsibility for payment of the account.
4. Account information changes – Any changes of account information, mailing address, account name, etc., should be made in writing or in person by the account holder to prevent any errors.
5. Service Requests for All Utilities – Any request for utility service will include water, garbage, and sewer if these services are already established at the requested location.
6. Place of Application – Customers may request utility service in person at Town Hall.
7. Time of Application – The Town will strive to meet the customer's needs for connection of service. Normal connection will be made within 24 hours of request.
8. Explanation of Policies – Customers can request a verbal explanation of the Town's policies and may obtain a written copy of the guidelines as well.

9. Welcome Packet – The Town may give each new customer brochures that include information about the utility service.
10. Rental Property must have a separate water meter for each unit.
11. Notice will be given to Rental Property Owners/Landlords that the current tenant has a delinquent bill and service is due to be disconnected and will not be reinstated until the delinquent bill is paid in full.

## **CUSTOMER DEPOSITS**

Customer deposits will be covered by the Customer Deposit Policy. A copy of this policy is available at Town Hall or on the Town's website, [www.north-wilkesboro.com](http://www.north-wilkesboro.com).

## **BILLING INFORMATION FOR CUSTOMERS**

1. Bills are mailed on or before the 25<sup>th</sup> of each month. If the customer does not receive a bill by the end of the month, it is their responsibility to contact the billing department to get the amount of their bill by calling 336-667-7129 x 3006.
2. The bill is payable by the 10<sup>th</sup> of each month and is considered past due if payment is not postmarked by the due date. A 10% late penalty will be assessed on the total balance due on the 11<sup>th</sup> of each month. When the due date falls on a weekend or holiday, the next working day will be considered as the due date.
3. All active utility accounts will receive a minimum bill each month as long as service is provided regardless of usage.
4. Properties that only have one (1) water connection (tap) and/or one (1) sewer connection (tap) provided to several units are billed a minimum utility bill per unit and then billed according to the total water consumption on the master meter.
5. Service is scheduled to be disconnected if payment is not received by 5:00 pm on the 19<sup>th</sup> of each month. A cut-off fee of \$50.00 and the past due balance (plus the current utility bill, if it has been mailed), and any penalties must be paid before service is reconnected.
6. A meter tampering charge of \$250.00 may be charged to any customer's utility account that reconnects their meter without the Town's knowledge.

## **WATER & SEWER TAPS / CONNECTIONS**

1. The owner of the property, general contractor, or plumber must apply in person for the necessary services. Information that will be needed in order to apply.
  - Service address
  - Billing information
  - Required tap/connection sizes
  - Payment for required taps/connections
  - Telephone Number

2. At least a two (2) week notification and payment is required to insure prompt service.

## **BILLING ADJUSTMENTS**

1. In the event there is a break or leak in the water line at a point between the water treatment plant and the customer's water meter, and the break or leak is not due to the fault of the customer, the customer shall not be required to pay any amount for the resulting water leak. If the break results from the fault of the customer, the customer shall pay to the Town the actual cost to repair the break or leak.
2. In the event there is a break or leak in the water line after the water passes through the customer's water meter, then the customer shall pay the cost to repair the break or leak and shall pay the following:
  - a. If the customer takes prompt action to repair the break or leak, then for the billing period including the time of the leakage, the customer shall pay an amount equal to that which would have been billed for the average usage of water and sewer for the previous twelve months. The customer is only allowed two billing release adjustments for leaks per calendar year. Exceptions may be made by the Finance Officer or Town Manager.
  - b. If the customer fails to take prompt action to repair the break or leak, then the customer shall pay for the full amount of water usage shown on the customer's water meter.
  - c. If the customer fails to take prompt action to repair the break or leak, and if the customer can show that the excess water usage due to the leak did not enter the sewer system, the customer shall pay that amount which would have been billed for sewer services based on the average water usage during the previous twelve months; otherwise, the customer shall pay the full amount for sewer usage as calculated from the water usage shown on the customer's water meter.
3. For the purpose of this policy "prompt action" shall mean repairing the water line break or leak within seven days after the time the leak is discovered or should have been discovered using reasonable care. A customer will be deemed to have taken prompt action if the break or leak is repaired within ten days after the Town mails to the customer the water and sewer bill for the period during which the break or leak occurred. The Town may require the presentation of a paid receipt for parts and/or labor indicating the date of completion of repairs.
4. If a customer has a leak and does not show any interest in repairing the leak, the Town will disconnect the service until the full balance due is paid.

## **ADJUSTMENTS FOR FILLING OF SWIMMING POOLS**

The Town may adjust a utility customer's bill in the event of seasonal filling of swimming pools. Adjustments shall be made in accordance with the following policy.

- Adjustments shall be authorized a maximum of one (1) time per year.
- The customer shall be responsible for notifying the Town Utility Billing Department to report a pool will be filled during the month. The Town will read the meter before and after the pool has been filled.
- No adjustment shall be made for water consumption.
- An adjustment may be made for the sewer consumption. The sewer charge for a billing period during which the pool was filled shall be calculated based on the usage from the Town readings to fill the pool.

## **PAYMENT OF UTILITY BILLS**

### **REGULAR PAYMENT OPTIONS**

The Town offers several different options for customers to pay their utility bills.

1. Customers may pay by cash, check or credit card by coming to the Town Hall, 832 Main Street.
2. Customers may mail their check in with the stub from their bill to P O Box 218, North Wilkesboro, NC 28659.
3. Customers may sign up for their bank account to be automatically drafted each month for the total amount due.
4. Customers may pay their bill online by going to [www.north-wilkesboro.com](http://www.north-wilkesboro.com) and clicking on the Pay Utility Bill link on the homepage.
5. Customers may pay their bill by calling 1-888-626-9064 and following the voice prompts.

## **AFTER HOURS PAYMENT OPTIONS**

For the customers' convenience, the Town offers several different methods for payment after normal business hours.

- Drop box located outside Town Hall, 832 Main Street.
- Online bill pay as described above.
- Payment by phone as described above.

## **AUTOMATIC BANK DRAFT PLAN**

1. Automatic bank drafts offer customers the option of having their bank accounts drafted on a set date of the month. This relieves the customer from having the possibility of lost of late payments and saves a trip to the Town Hall or the cost of a stamp.
2. The draft date is the 10<sup>th</sup> of each month. This will allow the customer time to verify or question their bill.
3. The customer will be required to supply the Town with an automatic bank draft application and a voided check for the purpose of drafting.
4. Only good credit customers will be eligible for this program.
5. Any draft returned by the bank because of insufficient funds or a closed account will be treated as a returned check and the customer will be released from the automatic bank draft program after the 2<sup>nd</sup> occurrence.
6. If the customer wishes to discontinue to automatic bank draft, the Town must be notified in writing by the 1<sup>st</sup> of the month.

## **EXTENSIONS OF TIME FOR PAYMENT OF BILLS**

1. Customer Request – All request must be made by the person in whose name the account is active.

2. Location – The customer requesting the extension must come into the Town Hall or call to request the extension by 5:00 pm on the day preceding the scheduled cut-off date.
3. Maximum – Maximum extended time will be seven (7) days from the cutoff date.
4. Valid Reason – The customer will be required to give a valid reason as to why the extension is needed. A valid reason for requesting an extension should relate to an unforeseeable hardship or emergency.
5. Agreement – By executing a customer extension, the customer agrees that if payment is not made by the specified time, service will be disconnected without further notice.
6. Approval of Extension – An extension is a privilege and will be granted based on customer need and circumstances. An extension will not be guaranteed and may be denied for excessive abuse.

No more than two (2) extensions shall be granted within a 12 month period. Upon approval of the extension, the late fee will still be applied to the delinquent account. The cutoff fee will not be charged if the customer makes payment by the agreed time.

## **RETURNED CHECKS**

1. If a customer has a returned check for non-sufficient funds or closed account by a bank, the Town will notify the customer and the customer will be required to pick-up the check and pay the amount of the check plus a return check fee of \$25.00 with cash, money order, cashier's check or credit card.
2. After two (2) returned checks, the customer will no longer be allowed to pay by check and will be required to pay by cash, money order, cashiers check or credit card.
3. If the customer does not pick up any check returned to the Town within seven (7) days, the Town will discontinue water service and will charge the customer the cut-off fee.
4. If the customer writes a NSF check to reconnect service for non-payment, the service will be disconnected immediately upon notification from the bank of the NSF check.

## **MEDICAL ALERT PROGRAM**

1. The customer has the responsibility of notifying the Town if there is someone in their household who is either:
  - Chronically or seriously ill
  - On a life support system
  - Medically requires uninterrupted utility service
2. The customer must provide a letter or certification from a doctor or hospital advising of the above condition. These letters will be reviewed and brought up-to-date in January of each year.
3. The customer who complies with these notification requirements may not have their water service disconnected for non-payment. If service needs to be disconnected to any other reason, the Town will make every effort to notify the customer prior to disconnection.

## **DISCONTINUING SERVICE**

## TRANSFER OF SERVICE

Customers may transfer service from one location to another. Any balance on the current or any previous utility account will have to be paid before service can be transferred. Transferred accounts for tenants must maintain the current deposit amount. Deposits may not be transferred.

## CLOSING A UTILITY ACCOUNT

After an account has been closed by either customer request or policy of the Town, all funds, including deposits, refunds and overcharge credits will be used against amounts owed the Town on the closed account first. Remaining funds will then be used against any amounts owed on any other accounts the customer may have with the Town. When those accounts have been cleared, a check for the remaining money will be issued to the customer for any net credit.

## TERMINATION OF SERVICE

1. Requesting Discontinuance of Service – Customers requesting discontinuance of service must contact the Town and determine the date when utility service will be terminated and final reads will be done. A customer shall be responsible for all charges to their account up until their final meter reading. The customer shall give Town a forwarding mail address and phone number.
2. Disconnection Scheduling – Disconnection from the Town’s utility system will be performed the same day as requested if notified before 2:00 pm of that day.
3. Final Bill – The customer’s final bill will be processed and mailed by the last working day of that month if disconnection is made by the 20<sup>th</sup> of that month.
4. Deposit Settlement or Disposition – According to N.C.G.S. 116B, any customer deposits, credits, or other property held to secure payment for utilities that are unclaimed for one (1) year or more are considered abandoned property and will be subject to the unclaimed property requirements. Upon discontinuance of utility services, a valid forwarding address should be given to the Town for possible refund of deposits or credits on the utility account. All unclaimed customer deposits and credits, regardless of the amount, are subject to the custody and control of the State of North Carolina. Prior to November 1<sup>st</sup> of each year, the Town will file a report accounting for all escheatable property with the Escheats Office within the Department of the State Treasurer. A check in the amount of the property listed should accompany the report.

## CUSTOMER’S RIGHTS PRIOR TO DISCONTINUANCE OF SERVICE

1. Reasonable Opportunity – The Town will discontinue utility service to customers for nonpayment only after giving the customer a reasonable opportunity to question the accuracy of the bill. Reasonable opportunity is defined as the period of time from the issuance of the bill until the date of potential disconnection.

2. Disputed bill – If a customer disputes the accuracy of their bill, they have the right to a hearing at which they may be represented in person or by another person of their choosing who may present, orally or in writing, their complaint and contentions.
3. Hearing – The Town will discontinue utility service for nonpayment of the bill on the cutoff date. The customer has an opportunity to dispute the bill before this date. Any customer desiring a hearing must contact the Finance Officer. Hearing may be scheduled between 8:30 am and 5:00 pm, Monday through Friday. The Town has the authority to settle the issue and reconnect any disconnected account while the matter is investigated.
4. Exceptions – Under special circumstances, the Town may choose not to interrupt service during extreme weather or when the customer is a participant in the medical alert program.

## **INVOLUNTARY DISCONTINUANCE OF SERVICE**

1. The Town may discontinue utility service for any one of the following reasons:
  - Failure of the customer to pay bills for utility service and garbage, as required in the billing information section of this policy, continuance of the account being delinquent will result in the meter being removed.
  - Failure of the customer to pay deposits as required or to increase deposits as required by the Town's deposit policy.
  - Upon discovery of meter tampering including bypassing the meter or altering its function.
  - Failure of the customer to permit Town employees access to their meters at all reasonable hours. Locked gates, loose dogs, parked cars over meters, etc., are violations of Town policy. Cars parked over meters may be towed at the owner's expense.
2. Prior to discontinuance of service for non-payment, a courtesy call may be initiated for first time delinquent customers, provided we have correct contact information. However, this does not alleviate the cutoff fee from being charged to the account.
3. Federal laws regarding bankruptcy require that the Town not alter, refuse, or disconnect service based solely on the basis of the beginning of bankruptcy proceedings based on the customer's failure to pay for pre-bankruptcy service, when a petition for bankruptcy has been filed. It is the customer's responsibility to provide the Town with any legal documents pertaining to bankruptcy.
4. Partial payments are accepted on account; however, a partial payment does not waive an involuntary discontinuance of service. A partial payment is first applied to the oldest charges outstanding.
5. Accounts subject to involuntary disconnection shall be assessed a cutoff fee of \$50.00 at 8:00 a.m. on the morning of the cutoff date. The cutoff fee can be released by the Town Manager or Finance Officer one (1) time if the customer has an excellent payment history and a valid reason for the delinquency. All past due balances must be paid before the cutoff date.
6. Within three (3) days from the cut-off date, if the utility account is still delinquent, the Town will recheck the meter to see if it has been cut back on by the resident. If the meter has been cut back on, the Town will pull the meter at that time and apply another \$50.00 cutoff fee. If damage is done to the Town's meter, legal action will be taken for tampering with utilities meter.
7. The Town will pursue collection of bad debt through the NC Debt Setoff Program and an outside collection agency of the Town's choice.

## **RECONNECTION**

When it becomes necessary for the Town to discontinue services for any of the reasons listed above, service will be restored after payment of:

- All past due bills due to the Town, including additional fees and charges required by this policy;
- Any deposit required;
- Any material and labor costs incurred by the Town according to the fee schedule.

After hours connection will not be made for any reason.

## **METERING GUIDELINES**

### **METER READING**

1. The Town's meters will be read by Town employees according to the Town's schedule. Reading dates will vary slightly from month to month due to weekends, holidays, weather conditions, and other factors. Monthly billing periods will be assumed to be 30 days, but may range from 27 to 33 days.
2. The Town's well-trained meter readers use modern meter reading equipment and techniques. If meter reading corrections are necessary, the Town will make the adjustments and a revised bill may be rendered upon request. A credit due to a customer from a meter reading error will be posted to the customer's account.
3. Weather conditions, such as snow and ice, may make meter reading impossible. In those circumstances, the Town will estimate utility usage based on a twelve (12) month average.

### **METER TAMPERING**

1. Tampering with a meter or bypassing a meter is against N.C.G.S. 14-151.1. The Town may call for prosecution in cases of meter tampering, water theft, and fraud to the fullest extent of the law.
2. A service charge representing the Town's cost for the investigation and processing of a meter tampering case will be billed to the customer's account that benefited from the tampering.
3. Repair costs shall be billed to the customer. Any usage, reconnection fees, or other applicable fees will be added to the customer's utility account when the meter has been tampered with.

## **GARBAGE, REFUSE AND RUBBISH**

### **RECEPTABLES REQUIRED**

1. Every person producing or accumulating refuse shall provide and keep on the premises occupied or used by him, refuse containers as supplied by the Town. The cost for such containers shall be governed by the Town's fee schedule.
2. A minimum of one (1) or a maximum of two (2) trash rollout containers are allowed at each residence. Each residence is also allowed one (1) recycling container. Multi-family dwellings shall be limited to no more than two (2) receptacles per dwelling unit.
3. Businesses shall obtain a refuse container as required by the Public Works Director or his designee.
4. It shall be unlawful for any person to deposit trash, refuse, waste, or any other materials which is not derived from the general operation of the business that the container is assigned to or owned by.

## **COLLECTION OF GARBAGE, REFUSE AND RUBBISH**

1. All refuse shall be picked up in accordance with the Town Code of Ordinances. Copies are available in the Town Hall.

## **PROFANE, INDECENT AND THREATENING CALLS**

It is against N.C.G.S. 14-196 to use "profane, indecent, or threatening language to any person over the telephone; annoying or harassing by repeated telephoning or making false statements over the telephone."

If a call of this nature is received, Town employees will do the following.

1. At the first profane or indecent word, ask the caller to please refrain from that type of language. If the profane or indecent language continues, politely inform the caller that if that type of language continues, the call will be terminated. If the profane or indecent language continues, terminate that call by hanging up.
2. Document the occurrence including the caller's name, address, and telephone number, if known. Report the incident to their supervisor, including the above information.
3. If the calls continue, notify their supervisor. The Town employee may contact the Town of north Wilkesboro Police Department, if deemed necessary.

## **AMENDMENTS TO THE POLICY**

The Board of Commissioners may revise this policy at any time, with or without notice. The Town Manager may add payment options to this policy subsequent to review by the Board of Commissioners at their next regularly scheduled meeting.