

## Water rates

Continued from Page A1

“We said, it’s crazy that we don’t have enough money for these basic things,” he said.

So the city worked with its engineers from Anderson Perry & Associates to revamp its rate structure entirely, basing the system more heavily on usage so that the people who put the most strain on the system pay the most. The change applied to both water and sewer rates.

“Probably from a percentage standpoint, peoples’ sewer cost went up higher than their water, but nobody ever calls it their sewer bill,” Morgan said.

The median Hermiston water customer — the one in the middle of a lineup from largest to smallest user in town — used 3,600 gallons of water in January 2019 and 32,400 gallons in August, which makes it hard to talk about the “average” amount a customer’s bill went up, even before factoring in that people also use different amounts of water in different years depending on weather.

Looking at just water, not sewer, the median user would have paid \$46.57 for 32,400 gallons of water in August and \$20.72 for 3,600 in January under the 2018 rates. Under the March 2019-March 2020 rates, the same user would pay \$98.40 for 32,400 gallons and \$31.80 for 3,600.

Flattened out over the course of a year, Morgan said they paid about \$16 per month more for water and \$20 more per month for sewer. Another dollar or two will be added to their monthly bill now, as a built-in automatic increase for inflation bumped up water and sewer rates 1.8% at the beginning of this month.

When residents flocked to city hall last summer to protest the increased water and sewer rates, however, the ones who testified in front of the city council often told stories of much higher increases than average — sometimes double or triple what they had been used to paying. They shared how the increase had taxed their budget and turned their lawns brown.

“Seniors are having to choose between medications or water,” resident Larry Smith told the council at the time.

Morgan acknowledged that in a usage-based system, the people using more than the median user would have seen their bills increase more than the calculations above.

He also said it was important to take anecdotal evidence with a grain of salt, highlighting one example where he said he checked a customer’s public claim their bill had tripled from July to August, only to find that the customer had not paid their July bill and therefore that amount had been added to their August bill.

As water and sewer rates increased, usage in the city went down. July is the city’s heaviest water usage month, and in July 2018 customers used 262 million gallons, while using 219 million gallons in July 2019 after the rate increase.

Morgan said some of that was residents conserving water in their own homes. In other cases, some organizations and government entities with large fields and lawns had switched from using potable city water for irrigation to using water rights they held but had not been using.

When customers came in to city hall to complain about the rate increase, Morgan said he and other city staff often sat down with them to analyze their hour-by-hour water usage on the EyeOnWater app, which is free to all customers. He said in many cases, they were able to show the customer how to greatly reduce their irrigation costs in the summer by being more strategic.

Some people didn’t realize their sprinklers were running more than once during the night, he said, while others were watering shaded “zones” in their yard for the same amount of time as the areas in direct sunlight needed. One customer hadn’t noticed a sprinkler head had been broken so that it fed straight into their crawl space instead of watering their lawn.

“A lot of folks weren’t familiar with their automatic sprinkler system,” Morgan said. “The EyeOnWater app would show they were running their system the exact same in August when it’s 100 degrees as in April when it’s cool and rainy.”

He urged people to get to know their system and their lawn to avoid such water-wasting mistakes. If people “stress” their lawn a little in the spring, and then slowly turn up their watering over the summer as the heat rises, Morgan said, then the grass will need less water in August because it grew deeper roots in the spring.

“Don’t flood your lawn in April,” he said.

The EyeOnWater app can also help catch leaks, by alerting people if they have a certain amount of water running 24/7. Morgan, for example, had a spigot that hadn’t quite been turned off all the way, and the app notified him that he had an 8 gallon per hour leak somewhere.

“Those add up to hundreds of gallons a month,” he said.

Now that the city has a year of bills under the new water rates to work with, customers can sign up for a budget-billing plan. The plan doesn’t give a discount on water, but makes it easier for a customer to budget by giving them a flat rate per month to pay, calculated by their average usage over the past 12 months.

For more information about water and sewer rates, customers can call the utility billing department at 541-567-5521, visit their temporary offices at 215 E. Gladys Avenue or visit [hermiston.or.us](http://hermiston.or.us).



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

The foundation for a yet-to-be-completed house awaits further construction along East Newport Avenue in Hermiston on Friday morning.

## Housing

Continued from Page A1

2008, out of 359 homes sold in the west Umatilla/north Morrow market, sold to list ratio was an average of 94%. In 2019, for 459 homes sold, the ratio was 98.7%.

“There are people that are overpricing houses that are not selling,” he said. “We have astute buyers.”

It can also go the other way. Members of the Columbia Basin Board of Realtors obviously have a bias toward people using a real estate agent — particularly those who can call themselves Realtors after getting certified by the National Association of Realtors. But those interviewed for the story said they had seen “for sale by owner” cases where people had significantly underpriced their homes.

“People are leaving \$10,000 or \$20,000 on the table, basically,” Barak said.

One thing sellers can do to get the most value out of their home is to fix it up before they sell it. Hughes said people feel too busy these days to put a lot of time into fixing up a new house, and many of them aren’t coming into a new home with extra cash on hand to immediately start remodeling or putting in new carpet.

“Most people just want a house that’s put together and move-in ready,” she said. “It’s ‘condition, condition, condition’ where it used to be ‘location, location location.’”

Hunter said she encourages clients to

drive by a home before they schedule a tour, and so something like the condition of the home’s exterior paint can make a big first impression.

Over time, the things buyers value have changed. Hunter said as more households have multiple vehicles, a three-car garage has become a more important amenity. Hughes said she sees a lot of clients looking for a shop, while Reberman said a big backyard used to be a big selling point. Now, homes with tiny yards often don’t have trouble selling, as people figure it’s less upkeep and watering, and their children could play at the park or school down the street. Barak said nationally, two top things people are looking for is a utility room and a pantry.

While the housing market in the area continues to do brisk business, pressure could be eased by new homes coming in. In 2019, according to Barak, Hermiston issued 62 building permits for new, stick-built homes (not including apartments, manufactured homes or townhomes). It issued 69 permits in 2018 and 44 in 2017. Pendleton issued 16 in 2019, 27 in 2018 and 18 in 2017.

The pace of new homes in west Umatilla County isn’t expected to slow. New subdivisions representing hundreds more homes are in the works in Umatilla, Stanfield and Hermiston. Hermiston locations where developers have gotten annexations, zoning changes or other actions by the city include Elm Avenue, West Theater Lane, East Theater Lane, Diagonal Road and East Punkin Center.

## CANCER CARE in Pendleton



Less time traveling to treatments.  
More time with family and friends.

At Eastern Oregon Cancer Center, we know the importance of being close to home while receiving cancer treatment. We will soon be offering radiation therapy in Pendleton, so that patients can spend less time traveling to cancer treatments, and more time with family and friends. If you or a loved one are facing a cancer diagnosis, we are here to help.

For more information, call 541.304.2264  
or visit [PendletonCancer.com](http://PendletonCancer.com).



EASTERN OREGON  
**CANCER  
CENTER** at Pendleton

541.304.2264 | 1713 SW 24th Street | Pendleton, OR 97801

[www.PendletonCancer.com](http://www.PendletonCancer.com) | [Find us on Facebook](#)

Now Scheduling Appointments



We invite the community to attend the  
**GROUNDBREAKING  
CEREMONY**  
of our new Rogers Toyota of Hermiston Center.

**Thursday March 12th - 11 AM**  
80364 N. Highway 395 in Hermiston

30,000 square feet building on a four acre lot, including  
showroom space, service department with additional  
service lanes and parking.

**ROGERS  
TOYOTA  
OF HERMISTON**

We Care About What You're Driving!

541.567.6461 • 1.800.522.2308

1550 N. 1<sup>st</sup> St  
Hermiston, OR

SALES HOURS  
MON-SAT: 8:30 am - 7 pm  
SUN: 10 am - 5 pm

SERVICE HOURS  
MON-FRI: 7 am - 5:30 pm  
SAT: 8 am - 5 pm

[toyotaofhermiston.com](http://toyotaofhermiston.com)