



City of Freeport
SPECIAL COUNCIL MEETING
6:00 p.m./Council Chambers/Freeport City Hall
March 5, 2019 Minutes

I. Meeting Opened

The March 5, 2019 Special Council Meeting was called to order at 6:00 p.m. by Mayor Russ Barley. The meeting was held in City Council Chambers of Freeport City Hall.

Council Members present: Mayor Russ Barley, Councilwoman Elizabeth Brannon, Councilman Eddie Farris, Councilwoman Amanda Green, and Councilman William “Boots” McCormick

Council Members absent: Councilwoman Elizabeth Haffner

Staff present: Assistant City Clerk Lori Cox, City Attorney Clay Adkinson, Utility Billing Manager Debbie Roberts, Finance Officer Sara Bowers and Water Supervisor Larry Tuggle

II. Invocation and Pledge of Allegiance

The invocation was given by Councilman Farris, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance to the American Flag.

III. City Disconnect Policy

Mayor Barley advised the Council that the Special Meeting was called to discuss the current Disconnection Policy approved on January 24, 2019.

The Mayor informed the Council that there were many issues during the last billing cycle since the policy was implemented. Customers are calling and coming into the Billing Department regarding their bill and having their water shut off. The Mayor then turned the meeting over to the Utility Billing Manager Debbie Roberts and asked her to explain how the Billing Department is handling the issues.

Billing Manager Roberts reported that customers are very upset because they were not given any prior notice that the new policy was going into effect. It has been a difficult time in Billing, but Staff made it through.

Billing Manager Roberts suggested raising the minimum amount owed from being greater than ten dollars (\$10.00), to a larger amount on the policy. She also, indicated that a lot of the customers did not receive the courtesy call because they need their contact information updated on their account.

The City of Freeport may take action on any matter during this meeting, including items that are not set forth within this agenda.

In accordance with Section 286.26, Florida Statutes, persons with disabilities needing special accommodations to participate in this meeting should contact the City Clerk’s office at 850-835-2822 by 5:00 p.m. on the day prior to the meeting.

No verbatim record by a certified court reporter is made of these proceedings. Accordingly, any person who may seek to appeal any decision involving the matters noticed herein will be responsible for making a verbatim record of the testimony and evidence at these proceedings upon which any appeal is to be based (see Section 286.0105, Florida Statutes).



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Finance Officer Bowers explained that the policy previously approved in 2016 was very vague. Implementing a new policy is always difficult at first.

William “Boots” McCormick asked how the bills got so high. Billing Manager Roberts explained it was an accumulation of months.

Councilwoman Brannon remarked that a dollar eighty-five (\$1.85) utility bill turned into forty dollars (\$40.00) after the late fee and disconnect fee were applied. The minimum for disconnection should be fifty dollars (\$50.00).

Finance Officer Bowers stated that her opinion is that a minimum of fifty dollars (\$50.00) would be too high. She explained that over a two-month cycle, the customer would still fall under the cut off amount, and it wouldn't be caught until the third month.

Councilman Farris advised that whatever the Council decides, there needs to be consistency.

Councilwoman Green apologized to the public and Water Customers for the poor implementation and roll out of the policy. Councilwoman Green advised that she was not fully aware of how the policy would be rolled out and should have been implemented as follows:

- A letter or postcard should have been sent out to the Customers first
- Roll the policy out in tiers with the highest bills first.
- This should not have been done during the new Utility Billing Manager's first week.

Councilwoman Green advised that this put a toll on the Meter Readers, the new Billing Manager and Billing Clerks. This also put a toll on the public and their trust in the City. It was disappointing.

Councilwoman Green addressed the Mayor regarding the possibility of how the issues could have been preempted. Councilwoman Green feels the City has a major PR issue in getting information out to the customers.

Mr. William Karl approached the podium and thanked the Council for having the meeting and expressed his concerns with the implantation of the new Disconnect Policy. He explained what had happened to him and his household, which includes those who have medical needs, when

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their water was shut off for a ten-dollar (\$10.00) water bill.

Councilman Farris expressed his apologies to the community and stated that the problem boils down to communication.

Councilwoman Brannon feels that the lack of communication is unacceptable. The website and emergency contact system need to be checked to make sure customers can get a hold of the City. A notification needs to be sent out explaining the new policy and to request everyone's correct contact information.

Attorney Adkinson advised that the Council may abate the policy until solutions to the issues are decided on by the Council.

Council discussion ensued regarding the following:

- Research Average Bill Amount
- Shut off Amount
- Abatement of the Policy until the end of March
- Notification letter/Postcard Verbiage and Cost
 - a. Request for Contact Information
 - b. Notification of New Policy

Council Action: Councilwoman Brannon made a motion to abate the new Disconnect Policy through March 31, 2019. Councilman Farris seconded the motion. All ayes, (Brannon, Farris, Green, McCormick); motion carried.

Mayor Barley requested Council discussion regarding partial payments. Mayor Barley's understanding was that partial payments were not supposed to be accepted. The balance on these accounts accumulate. Should customers be allowed to pay partial payments or do they need to pay in full? Council discussion ensued and concurred that the policy needs to be followed consistently.

Mayor Barley asked staff to explain transfers of old balances to new accounts for customers who had an outstanding bill on a closed account. Staff advised that letters have been sent notifying the customers regarding the old account balances.

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Council discussion ensued regarding collections of closed account balances. Staff explained the current process and will investigate improving the process. A search by Social Security number for all new accounts should be done to ensure prior balances are not owed.

Council Action: Councilwoman Green made a motion to instruct staff to create two postcard templates, one with the new Disconnect Policy and one requesting updated customer contact information, to be brought back to the next meeting. Councilman McCormick seconded the motion. All ayes, (Brannon, Farris, Green, McCormick); motion carried.

Councilwoman Brannon requested that the emergency phone number be checked to ensure customers can reach Staff. Water Supervisor Larry Tuggle explained that the phones are working correctly, and someone was dispatched immediately to Mr. Karl's residence. He had taken it upon himself to cut the lock off the meter and turn the water back on before staff arrived. Because of the call volume, all customers were not called back; however, all calls were received, and staff was dispatched to the residences for immediate assistance.

IV. Adjournment

Mayor Barley adjourned the meeting at 6:52 p.m.

FREEPORT CITY COUNCIL

Mayor

ATTEST

City Clerk

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