

LETTERS

Clifton Journal 6/8/18

Part III of Clifton's Sewergate

This is the third in a series of three letters outlining my findings regarding inconsistencies in the sewer fee billing practices of the city. All findings were confirmed through OPRA requests and a meeting with the city manager.

Throughout Chapter 375-3.4 Sanitary Sewer User Charge which was added on Feb. 4, 2008 by the then council (Ord. No. 6714-08), it is stated only users of Clifton's sanitary sewer system shall be charged a "sanitary sewer user charge." Pretty clear, right? If your home is tied into the Clifton sewer system, then you have to pay this sewer fee.

However, many homes in Clifton are not tied into the sewer system and still have been charged this "user fee." Many Clifton residents who live on the border of Passaic, Nutley and Paterson are actually not "users of Clifton's sanitary sewer system" but are tied into the abutting city. For example, since I live on the border of Passaic my house on Dwasline Road is actually tied into Passaic's sanitary sewer system (which was confirmed by examining the sewer maps of both Clifton and Passaic and a die test showing where the outflow goes).

Clifton residents on Wesley Street are also tied into the Passaic sewer system. There are homes on Kingsland Avenue with Clifton addresses but are tied into Nutley's sewer system. Some homes on Hazel Street are tied into Paterson's sewer system. So all these homes are paying a "sewer user fee" even though the homes do not use the Clifton sewer system. For example, those Clifton homes tied into Passaic's sewer system should pay the flat \$100 fee that Passaic charges all other single family homes tied into its system since they use the Passaic system and not Clifton.

To recap my findings in this three-part series of letters, Clifton's sewer billing system is a mess since its origination in 2008. Many large "users" like multi-unit apartment complexes and strip malls with multiple separate businesses were never charged the minimum sewer fee from 2008 to 2016 and the city has no intention of back billing these users for the fees. Tier II users (like houses of worship, VFW halls and larger users such as WH Linen Supply and Metropolitan Foods) were actually paying two sewer charges and the city has no intention of crediting these users. Residential properties near some abut-

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ting cities are being charged this "user fee" when they actually don't use the system and the city has no intention of crediting these non-users. This is just what I uncovered and one must wonder how many other non-billings exist. Clearly this is a mess.

In 2014/2015, this council commissioned and paid for a sewer rate study by the city's outside auditors Lerch, Vinci & Higgins which did not find any of these errors and which was used by this council to raise our sewer fees between 50 to 77 percent (this is even stated in the report). So basically, you and I have been footing the bill for these errors.

In conclusion, I sincerely hope that I have opened the eyes of each Clifton taxpayer with this outrageous scam called the Clifton Sewer Fee. We are the ones paying for this city's incompetence.

Here are my suggestions: 1) This council should immediately vote to hire a forensic accounting firm to quantify the amount of money lost (the city manager's guess-estimate of \$200,000 is not good enough). Each and every taxpayer has a right to know how much money was lost - this reminds me of \$1.3 million Ameri-Pay scandal where no one was held accountable. 2) If this council is unwilling to hire a forensic accounting firm then I suggest each taxpayer call for an immediate investigation by the NJ State Comptroller's Office (855) 672-8477. This division has the ability to get the answers this city and council are unwilling to give to the taxpayers of Clifton.

This separate sewer fee was enacted in 2008 as a mechanism get around the 2 percent budget cap and have taxpayers continue to pay for the waste and

abuse at the local government level. It is time this stops. Our elected officials work for us. It is time they give us the answers we are entitled to.

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