

CARE & CONSERVE

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The City of Atlanta has long recognized the need of a growing segment of their customer base for some level of assistance. A number of factors contribute to that need; they are as follows:

- high rate of poverty in Atlanta's service area...17% of all households in Fulton County are living below Federal poverty standards;
- large stock of substandard housing...24% of all housing units in the City of Atlanta;
- nationwide it is reported that 2 in every 10 toilets are leaking. In some of Atlanta's older neighborhoods, that figure is more like 40% of all toilets;
- water/waste water rates increasing due to rising costs of meeting stringent state and federal environmental regulations.... presents an affordability problem for low and fixed income customers;
- due to the 1994 passage of House Bill 862, property owners can no longer be held responsible for water bills of their tenants. Therefore, they do not have any incentive to make necessary plumbing repairs to conserve water and save their tenants money. Atlanta has a very high percentage of rental property (60 % of all housing units).

Although the need is great, the Atlanta Water Department has been unable to assist due to restrictions in the bond covenants of the Water and Sewer Revenue Fund. The Department is prohibited from providing free water or services. The Care and Conserve Program is therefore totally dependent upon voluntary contributions, corporate donations and grant monies.

With a first year budget of \$60,000, the City of Atlanta Water Department, through a non-profit contractor, will serve as many customers as possible within the three program areas of Care & Conserve. First customers will be evaluated to determine whether they qualify for assistance under the program. The standard which will be utilized is 125% of the 1994 Federal (Office of Management and Budget) Poverty Index. For example a family of four earning under \$18,500 would qualify.

Qualifying customers can apply for assistance with their water and sewer bill to prevent termination of service. One emergency payment per family (or individual) of \$5 to 250 depending upon the situation and the availability of funds would be allowed per year. The program cannot be funded at a level sufficient to provide a year round utility safety net for the low income.

Water Department consumption records will be reviewed

to determine how water is being used. If consumption is high, homes will be "audited" or inspected to determine whether there are leaks or faulty plumbing causing the consumption to be unusually high. Faucets and fixtures will be tested to measure water use per minute or per flush in the case of a toilet. Depending upon the findings several different types of plumbing repairs could be made from a low cost washer replacement to a higher cost toilet replacement.

If plumbing problems are not in evidence, but fixtures are older and utilize water in greater amounts than currently allowed under the City's Plumbing Code, conservation measures will be taken by installing water efficiency devices. Again, this can range from a low cost installation such as a flow restrictor or low flow showerhead to the replacement of a toilet with a new 1.6 gallon per flush model.

All customers seeking assistance through the Care & Conserve Program will receive water conservation materials to read. All participants in the program will be counseled on ways to reduce their water consumption and save money on their water bills. Consumption data will be monitored and follow up visits will be made within the year as necessary for best results.