In early 2022 the city of Sebastopol voted to borrow $2m in order to install digital water meters to replace rate payer analog meters that had been in place for decades.

The rationale for taking this action was primarily claimed to be in order to create an early warning system for water rates payers to alert them if they had leaks on their property. This would save them money and conserve water (although since the City of Sebastopol owns wells accessing a giant aquifer under our land we have no water shortage issues regardless of drought year conditions elsewhere).

Digital water meters are connected to centralized software, presumably owned by the city, that should provide an enhanced real time data flow of water consumption and data. Rate payers were told they could use the 'EyeOnWater' app, but this app in 2024 only allows you to track how much water you drink for hydration and is littered with advertising.

Given the proposed substantial rate increases in water and waste water charges that are urgent due to the enterprise fund having had funds siphoned off into the general fund over the last ten years, it would be illuminating to understand how city staff have been using the data

provided by our digital water meters to create reports and organize appropriate billing.

The water usage information captured since 2022 was presumably used by the consultants and city staff to formulate the current proposed pricing increases. it would be very helpful for our new city manager, council and rate payers to have a workshop with city staff that explains the working of the digital water system, the data and information it creates and the software and processes used to manipulate it and create billing cycles.

This would be particularly useful for local business rate payers, particularly those that require substantial water consumption: hairdressers, pet groomers, launderettes, restaurants , car washes and other entities for whom water is an essential part of their product or service.

Making sense of how the city rate structure works (we have various units of measurement in our billing invoices that are impossible for most lay people to understand) would be very helpful as council decides how to move forward with citizen and business reaction to the proposed increases.

In order for citizens and businesses to accept these

enormous rate increases a very detailed explanation of how water is monitored and measured is in order, particularly given the recent huge city borrowed investment in digital infrastructure. Are we getting the value we expected? Are the data and reporting flows working as they should? What would city staff like to see as improvements to their processes and workflows?

At this present time I would argue we don't have enough information to justify the huge increases, how and why they are necessary and, to use corporate terminology, how city data sanctity is checked and validated.

We also have to face up to multiple issues around massive increases: we may well lose a lot of businesses, the cost of a haircut, carwash, laundry etc will get a lot more expensive as costs are passed on to consumers. Obviously low income residents will really struggle to absorb this latest inflationary squeeze.

This is very tough for the city which is also struggling with budget shortfalls. Do we also have an issue with data accuracy and sanctity in other areas that are skewing budget numbers? I feel we really need accurate baseline before making any serious decisions.

I do feel the city is having a major reality check and moving in the right direction, and appreciate all the hard work as we finally attempt to paddle away from the edge of the waterfall…

Oliver Marks
Downtown Sebastopol