

Water bills mount as dispute drags on

By Brent Jones, Baltimore Sun, October 24, 2008

Several weeks ago, Kim Moore made a trip to the mailbox and was greeted with a \$2,700 water bill. All Moore could do was chuckle. Rarely in her life, she said, had she seen anything more ridiculous. "I was like, 'This is crazy. This can't be my bill,'" Moore said.

Later, Moore said, she realized the large amount was the continuation of what she and some tenants say has been a nearly 10-year dispute over who is responsible for the water bills at the West Baltimore public housing complex where they live.

Today, residents of the Townes of Terraces are scheduled to meet with the water department, the city housing authority and elected officials, where they hope to resolve the water bills, some of which have reached thousands of dollars over the years, due to interest, and have led to threats of eviction. One woman's bill, dated Sept. 8, was for \$3,538. Another Terraces resident said she has an outstanding balance of \$1,029.

About 45 residents of the development at Saratoga Street and Martin Luther King Boulevard gathered with members of management last week to discuss the bills. City Councilman William H. Cole IV, who was present at last week's forum, said he expects many of the bills will be reviewed and adjusted.

"In talking with some of the tenants, these aren't isolated incidents," he said.

Moore, who lives in the 700 block of Dr. Benjamin Quarles Place, agrees. She said dozens of residents didn't receive water bills for a couple of years, and when the invoices showed up this summer, they were accompanied by letters threatening eviction.

Some residents say they assumed that management was paying the bill. Representatives from Edgewood Management, which the city hired to run the development, suggested some bills might have been sent to the housing authority. But they said they had no choice but to pass the expense on to tenants.

The public housing complex opened in 1999. Longtime residents and Edgewood agree that not all tenants in the 201-unit development received water bills the first few years. But the lease states tenants are responsible for paying utilities, including water.

Over the years, water bills have come sporadically, residents say. A spokesman for the Department of Public Works referred all questions regarding the Terraces to the housing authority.

Housing Commissioner Paul T. Graziano said he is aware of the dispute and has instructed management to review each disputed account.

"We've given the management company clear directions that we need to see them take

this seriously and research all of these accounts," he said. "I don't know the specifics about individual accounts, but clearly there is something that doesn't add up here."

Formerly known as Lexington Terrace, Townes at the Terraces is part of the HOPE VI federal program that has allotted almost \$150 million to Baltimore in the past 15 years to replace dilapidated public housing with safer, more attractive options.

The \$65 million development has faced its share of problems, including the losses of free Internet access and a day care center as Hope VI money diminished.

Rosa Nelson, 59, lives in the 700 block of Vine St. and said she has been in her home for four years. Nelson said she received a water bill two months after she moved in and hadn't received another one before this summer. That bill came with an eviction notice, and Nelson said she went to court over the matter Oct. 15.

Nelson said the case was postponed and management has since agreed to pay \$2,000 of her \$3,500 bill.

"It's no way in the world I can afford that. I'm on a fixed income," said Nelson, who added she pays \$269 for rent. "If they would have sent me my quarterly bill, I would have paid them. But they never did."

At the meeting last week, a representative from Edgewood maintained that many of the tenants received water bills but did not pay the balance. If the bills are not paid, invoices will continue to come to the unit, even if the tenant departs.

Larry Davis, a manager at Edgewood, said the onus is on the water department to determine which units need adjustments. "We're conduits for the water department, and if they want this to disappear, go away or stop, the water department is the one that is going to do that," he said.

Davis maintained that no residents have been evicted because of unpaid water bills, but the legal process has started in several cases. He could not be reached to comment further this week.

Residents say they simply want their bills set to zero.

"We're not trying to get out of anything," Moore said. "We just want to come to an agreement."