Renter cost shock warning with incoming Wellington water meters

Tom Hunt | The Post

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Holly Davey is in a flat of seven that could soon be lumped with a new standalone water bill. From left; Asha Roberts, Holly Davey, Phoenix Grant and Holly Minchin.
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New details about incoming Wellington water meters reveal that landlords will be liable for the new and rapidly rising bills – but tenants will likely have to wear the cost.

And for large, shared flats the costs could be painful. Volumetric charging will mean big water users – such as shared flats or large families – potentially getting stung with the biggest bills.

The new water services plan for Wellington City, Hutt Valley and Porirua shows that landlords will be liable for water metered charging, expected to be universal by 2030.

It notes the bills can legally be passed onto tenants but "if landlords do not adjust rent to recognise any on-charging it may create new affordability challenges for a group of consumers who are more likely to be on lower incomes".

Student Holly Davey shares an Aro Valley flat with six others and said the new water bill, which she imagined would be passed on to tenants, "would suck".

"It is hard enough to balance everything at the moment," she said. She doesn't have to go far to hear – to an extent – what the new regime would look like.

Her grandparents live in Ōtaki, where water meters were put in place about a decade ago. They are not fans, with rates rising since and the water charge almost doubling – albeit to only about $600 a year.

"We rarely see landlords lowering rents when other costs shift," says Victoria University of Wellington Students' Association President Liban Ali.
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Wellington's predicted water charges are orders of magnitudes greater with the average house expected to pay up to $5700 annually within the decade on top of property rates – with high-use households potentially paying more. The same average household now pays $2100 a year, as part of rates.

Property Investors Federation spokesperson Matt Ball labelled the changes a "cynical move" to shift responsibility for "disastrous" council mismanagement from councils to landlords.

Recent years had seen rates soar, while insurance, maintenance and interest rates went "through the roof" and rents dropped.

"Landlords have not been able to pass on their increased costs to tenants," Ball said.

"Many Wellington landlords are struggling, so no, rents won't come down with the introduction of water meters."

Wellington City councillor Geordie Rogers said rents should decrease but probably wouldn't.
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Wellington City councillor Geordie Rogers, a renter advocate, said rents should also potentially go down, but it was "very unlikely" they would.

He, with mayor Tory Whanau and councillor Tim Brown, were trying to get the Wellington City Council to set up a version of Auckland's Water Utility Consumer Assistance Trust to help those struggling with water bills, including helping fix leaks and giving financial assistance.

Brown said a Wellington version was "absolutely critical" while Whanau said it was important landlords passed on any rates reductions to tenants via lower rents.

"There's a lot of competition in the rental market right now and that should help ensure landlords pass on those decreases in rents," she said.

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Victoria University of Wellington Students' Association President Liban Ali said there was a "real concern" charges would be passed to renters without a drop in rents. The net result would be another living cost increase.