



Water Smart in Toronto

By Elisabeth Lisican

City's five-year-old mandatory Water Meter Program nearing 100% completion

The city of Toronto has come a long way since the start of its mandatory Water Meter Program in the spring of 2010.

Over the past five years, the city has provided automated meters to customers who were on flat-rate billing and replaced existing meters with more efficient metering technology. These days, customers can keep better track of their water use and detect leaks more quickly.

The transition is 95% complete, with 450,000 of the city's 475,000 water accounts currently converted.

"Prior to [the program], out of the 475,000, about 70,000 had no meters. So in Toronto—this big city—we had 70,000 accounts with no water meters," said Carlo Casale, manager, Water Meter Program, Toronto Water.

Finding the Right AMR

Something had to be done. The proposed Water Meter Program was approved by the Toronto City Council in June 2008 at \$219 million and is mandatory under City of Toronto Municipal Code, Chapter 851, Water Supply. The program integrates all water meter reading, data storage and billing operations across the city.

The city chose Neptune meters and Aclara Star transmitters that are battery powered and send one-way readings—each a quarter-second in length—four times per day. Once the water consumption data are sent, the system completely turns off. The data are sent to data collection units located throughout the city, connected to central servers for billing.

Because of the region's cold weather, the meters are predominantly installed in basements.

"We wanted something that was robust, that could be put into place in Toronto, [accommodating] its different topology," Casale said. "We wanted something that will last about 20 years."

As far as challenges go, Casale said the city "did have some homes that needed pipe repaired before the meters could be installed, but overall it's been quite a positive experience for customers because they book an appointment, then somebody shows up within a [time] window, and a meter is installed."

Clear Communications

The city expects to realize \$28 million in revenue recovery from converting flat-rate customers and installing more accurate meters, and \$5 million in operational efficiencies from eliminating manual meter reading and improving customer service at call centers. Customer service has been a key component of the program, and the city developed a detailed communications plan from the outset.

"We met with our supervisory staff and our contractor weekly, and there was a lot of communication back and forth," Casale said. "We were constantly tweaking the customer service message and training of our installers to make sure that [it] was handled correctly."

The city made sure to educate all front-line staff and created a consistent knowledge base for the 311 line staff (who provide residents, businesses and visitors with easy access to non-emergency city services, programs and information) as well as the Revenue Services and Neptune call centers. Councillors from each of the city's wards also were well versed on the program.

"In one of our wards, we have a councillor who might look after 15,000 accounts, or 15,000 homes and businesses," Casale said. "That could be 70,000 people who live in that one ward. Some people have a direct link to their councillor; and if the councillor can explain what the program is about, it drives a better message; it's clearer for the customer why we're doing this. Our communications with councillors, with residents and the businesses have been very clear."

One of the other actions the city took was to make sure that project details were transparent. "We put a lot of our work [into] a website," Casale said. "As we completed a ward, we would show the progress in that ward [on the site]."

Above all, messaging was most important in order to achieve customer buy-in—in particular, communicating the fact that the program was mandatory from the get-go.

"We really tried to [set] clear expectations of what was required," Casale said. **w&wd**

Elisabeth Lisican is managing editor of *W&WD*. Lisican can be reached at elisican@sgcmail.com or 847.391.1012.