

WATER METER REPLACEMENT PROJECT

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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Project Overview

What is the Meter Replacement Project (MRP)?

The meter replacement project replaces roughly 24,000 water meters over three years old in our service area that have outlived their useful life. The new meters respond to customer requests for meters that provide more accessible account information and reduce water waste. The Water Department has contracted with Utility Partners of America (UPA) to install meters across the service area.

What is the life expectancy of a water meter, and why are you replacing meters that are older than three years?

The average life expectancy of a water meter is 15 years. Until now, we have replaced meters as we became aware of their malfunction, one by one. This has resulted in a population of meters ranging in age by as much as 30 years and with various brands and technologies. The reason we are replacing all meters three years and older is so that our entire system is roughly the same age and type, and because it's much more cost efficient to replace meters in bulk rather than one by one. This will build consistency into the system.

I just got a new meter last year. Why do I need a new one?

If you have received a new meter in the last three years it will not be replaced. You can already access all of the benefits of the new meters through the [WaterSmart](https://www.santacruz.watersmart.com) portal. Visit [santacruz.watersmart.com](https://www.santacruz.watersmart.com) to log in and view your water use.

Project Benefits

What are the benefits of the new meters?

The new meters provide numerous benefits, including:

- The ability to view and track water use, so that customers may reach water consumption and bill reduction goals
- Leak and high use detection, and proactive notification to customers
- Minimized water abuse, theft, and waste
- Cost per meter is reduced with large-scale installation

How can I view my water use, and how can I save money with the new meters?

Customers can view their water use through the [WaterSmart](https://www.santacruz.watersmart.com) online portal. This portal allows customers to view daily, hourly, and monthly water use. It also allows customers to set up email or text alerts for high, abnormal, or continuous use. These new features help customers to save money by allowing them to track their water use and catch leaks early.

How significant does a leak need to be to be picked up by the new meters, and how will I be notified if I have a leak?

Leak notifications vary by property type. For a single family home, customers will be notified by email or text message of continuous water use of 5 or more gallons per hour for a period of 72 hours. Other alerts can also be enabled, such as abnormally high or unplanned use notifications. Customers must register for the [WaterSmart](#) online portal in order to receive and customize these notifications.

Can I view my water use information if I'm not the account holder?

Yes. Once the account holder creates their account on the [WaterSmart](#) portal they can allow access to others by adding a user. The account holder will need the second user's email address to send them a portal invitation.

What are other benefits of the project?

By doing a mass replacement of meters rather than replacing them one-by-one as they fail, the Water Department is able to dramatically reduce costs per meter. The project also significantly reduces the amount of driving needed to read meters, thereby reducing the Department's carbon footprint.

Project Costs

How much does the project cost and how is it being paid for?

The total cost of the project is \$14,250,000. It's funded by a combination of low-interest debt financing (85%) and pay-as-you-go (15%).

Will my water rates go up as a result of the new meters?

No, your rates will not go up just because of your new meter. However, some customers may notice that their bill is higher after the new meter is installed. This is because the old water meters are mechanical, and many have slowed down (or stopping altogether) as the internal parts wore out. This degradation is what we call "under registration." It's possible that your old meter was under-registering, and your new meter will now more accurately register all of your water consumption.

Will I be back-billed for all of the water my old meter didn't register?

Typically, we don't have a good way to estimate the amount of water that was not registered by the old meter, so we don't have a good way to back bill customers.

New meter installation process

What does the installation process entail?

Customers will receive two notifications prior to their meter being replaced. A letter will be sent approximately one month beforehand, and a post card will be sent approximately two weeks beforehand. On the day of the installation, the installer, Utility Partners of America (UPA) will:

- Knock on the door and speak to whoever is home. UPA installers will have proper identification (see additional details below). The customer will be notified that UPA is there to replace the meter, and that water will be turned off for 15-30 minutes.
- Proceed with replacing the meter. Upon installation, the installer may need to run some water through the meter using the hose spigot on the outside of the house.
- Restore water service once the installation is complete, and leave a door hanger. The door hanger will notify the customer that the meter has been replaced, and will provide a phone number and website if the customer has questions, concerns, or would like more information about the project.

My neighbor received a new meter but I did not. Why?

There are several reasons why you may not have had your meter replaced at the same time as your neighbors

- You already have a new meter: If you have received a new meter in the last three years it will not be replaced. You can already access all of the benefits of the new meters through the WaterSmart portal. Visit santacruz.watersmart.com to log in and view your water use.
- Your meter box is obstructed: If there is landscaping, parked cars, fences, etc. over your meter box the installer is unable to replace your meter. Please remove any obstructions from your meter box. Property owners will be contacted by Santa Cruz Municipal Utilities if obstructions are not removed.
- Your plumbing is in poor condition: If the installer determined that attempting to replace the meter could cause a leak or break on your water service line they did not proceed and notified Santa Cruz Municipal Utilities. City staff will inspect the plumbing and contact the property owner if any action or repair is necessary.
- We don't have the necessary equipment in stock yet: some areas of town need a different radio that we don't currently have in stock. Once those radios are received your meter will be replaced shortly after.

I received a letter that my plumbing was in poor condition. What do I do?

Your meter was not replaced due to the condition of your water service line. The installer (UPA) determined that attempting to replace the meter could cause a leak or break. A second verification was performed by city staff before a letter was sent. Property owners have the option to either hire a plumber to assess and repair their service line, or allow the City to attempt the meter replacement despite the poor condition of the plumbing. Please visit the [Property-Side Plumbing Webpage](#) for more information, or call Santa Cruz Municipal Utilities at 831-420-5220.

How will the crew working on meters in my neighborhood be identified?

Utility Partners of America (UPA) have been contracted by the Water Department to replace water meters. Installers will carry "City of Santa Cruz Contractor" ID cards, drive white utility trucks with both the UPA and Water Department logos on the side, and wear UPA-labelled uniforms. Installers will never need to enter your home, and will provide their ID upon request. If you are ever unsure of someone claiming to be an installer for the Water Department, please call customer service at 831-420-5220.

What if my plumbing is broken during the meter installation?

Chapter 16.04.070(b) of the City of Santa Cruz Municipal Code states that it is the responsibility of the property owner to maintain and repair property-side service connection facilities. While the installer will make every effort to not damage plumbing, it is the responsibility of the owner to repair plumbing that break as a result of normal maintenance activities, such as a meter replacement.

I received a door hanger that said my meter was replaced, but the installer was unable to flush the line. What do I need to do?

In order to flush the air out of your plumbing, please run water from the highest water fixture inside the home or business (usually a showerhead or sink faucet) until water flows clear and continuously for one minute.

I received a letter and/or postcard informing me that my meter will be replaced. Do I need to do anything?

There are several actions customers can take that will make the replacement easier for the installer. These include

- Make sure the property-side service line from the meter into your property is in good condition
- Prune back any plant material that has grown over your current meter box
- Dig out your meter box to expose your meter

I received notice that my meter will be replaced, but I am also in the process of building or development project that will require an upsize in meter. Which size of meter will be installed?

The water meter replacement project is a system-wide project that aims to replace all of the existing water meters. Existing water meters will be replaced in-kind (i.e. the same size and configuration as the current meter). Building and development projects in the service area will still need to upsize or retrofit their services per the Water Department's requirements.

Meter technology

What information is the City collecting from the new meters, and how will it be used?

The new meters will provide more detailed water use information than before. While the previous meters provided only a monthly read, these new meters will provide daily water use information. The Water Department will use the information collected by the meter to continue to bill customers on a monthly basis; it will also make this information accessible to customers through the [WaterSmart](#) portal. Customers can use this information to track their water use and set up leak alerts.

How will my account information be secured?

Online customer account information is protected by multiple security layers. In addition, the City uses detection and prevention systems to monitor activity and notify staff of suspicious activity on the server or network.

How will I know that you read my meter and not someone else's?

The radio that sends your meter reading has a unique identifier that is transmitted along with the read data. This identifier is compared electronically to your account record to ensure that the meter reading matches the meter assigned to your account.

After you replaced my meter, my bill and/or water use is higher. Is my meter reading correctly?

We understand that it can be frustrating and surprising to receive a high bill. Unfortunately, many of our old meters were under-registering, or completely stuck, due to age. Your new meter is highly accurate, and is now able to provide not only a correct billing read, but also hourly data that you can view through the [WaterSmart](#) portal. Before your meter was installed, it was thoroughly tested for accuracy by the manufacturer.

Are there any potential health concerns with the radio frequency signals, and do the new meters have stronger radio frequency than the old meters?

The products that make up the AMI system are stringently evaluated for safety and meet all standards established by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), and Institute of Electrical (IEEE) and Electronics Engineers. Additionally, the meter's radio has a battery life of 20 years and remains off except for the brief moment when it communicates a meter reading. Readings occurs four times a day, and transmission takes a quarter of a second. The new meter's radios have lower radio frequency signals than the radios in the old meters.