



Atlanta to offer homeowners warranty plan for water leaks

By Ernie Suggs

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

The city of Atlanta will announce Thursday the creation of a program to protect homeowners from unexpected expenses related to leaking water and sewer pipes.

Under a new warranty program administered through the National League of Cities and Utility Service Partners, residents will be able to buy into a program that will provide repairs for a low monthly fee -- similar to insurance payments.

Atlanta users, already paying the highest water rates in the country, could potentially save thousands of dollars in repair costs, especially since the city is not responsible for service line repairs, particularly breaks between a home and the street.

“Homeowners know all too well that things go wrong unexpectedly. Many residents become frustrated when they are told that the city is not responsible for a service line repair,” said Atlanta City Council member Felicia Moore, who is co-sponsoring the legislation. “This warranty program offers peace of mind.”

If approved by the full council, Atlanta residents will pay \$4.75 a month to protect their water lines for repairs up to \$4,000. Milwaukee is the only other major city in the country to embrace the program so far, although about 40 smaller municipalities have signed on since the program launched last December.

“We see this as a win-win for residents,” said Denise Belser, the NLC’s program director. “It becomes a financial problem, because people don’t often budget for something like this.”

No public funds will be used to promote the program, said Dexter Chambers, a spokesman for the Atlanta City Council.

Residents with a problem would call a Utility Service Partners 800 number and get connected with a local plumber.

“It should all be a smooth process if this program works the way everybody is committed to it,” said Linda Benninger, owner of Atlanta Plumbing Plus, which will become one of the

program's contractors.

Over the past two years, Atlanta residents have bristled at skyrocketing water bills that seemingly jump indiscriminately. Residents have complained about \$50 bills going up to \$500 for a few months, then back down to normal rates.

The city soon will begin a process of checking more than 160,000 residential water meters to see if the problem lies there. But leaks have also been the culprit in some of the spikes.

For Larry Lipman, news of the program comes a few months too late. Like hundreds of Atlanta residents in similar situations, Lipman was shocked when his mother's water bill jumped to around \$400 a month.

Because his mother lived alone, Lipman called a plumber to find out if there was a leak somewhere in the pipes of the 60-year-old Buckhead home.

The plumber did find a leak, but it was between the house and the street.

"He suggested a new water line from the street to the house, which did solve most of the problem," Lipman said. "But the learning curve was finding out that we were responsible."

Lipman ended up paying more than \$2,000 for the new line out of his own pocket.

"If I had the warranty, it would have saved us tons of money," Lipman said. "It is something I definitely would have considered, being in a 60-year-old house. Buckhead is full of old homes, all part of the original sewer system. It feels like we are all living on borrowed time."