



Dalton Sewer User Fees

Dalton sewer rates are increasing substantially this year. This note is intended to provide residents with some context about why the increase is occurring and what the Town is doing to address the underlying issues.

Why Are Sewer Rates Increasing?

The costs included in your sewer bill have two primary components.

The first is the cost for Dalton to maintain more than 30 miles of underground sewer piping, some of which is 127 years old. The second, and much larger, component is what Dalton pays to the City of Pittsfield for wastewater treatment.

Dalton has had municipal sewer service since around 1900. At the time, the density of housing in much of Dalton made it impractical for each household to have its own well and septic system. Until approximately 1963, sewage was discharged directly into the Housatonic River.

In the late 1950s, under orders from the State Board of Health, a wastewater treatment facility was built in Pittsfield. Dalton bonded for and paid a portion of the cost of constructing the system. By 1963, all of Dalton's wastewater was being sent to Pittsfield.

The system was upgraded again in the 1970s, and Dalton once again bonded for its share of the project. In 1973, Dalton entered into a 30-year intermunicipal agreement with Pittsfield.

Because of the terms of that agreement and the formula on which it was based, Dalton residents have historically paid substantially lower wastewater treatment rates than Pittsfield residents. Pittsfield leadership has raised concerns about this arrangement since at least the mid-1990s.

The formula established in 1973 was appropriate for the circumstances at that time, but it is no longer equitable in 2027, 54 years later. The original formula was based on three factors: the number of gallons of wastewater, the turbidity of the effluent, and the amount of suspended solids in the water. It did not account for other significant costs, including the cost of maintaining capacity and more recent bonding costs.

The New Payment System

Today, there are 7 towns that discharge into the Pittsfield Wastewater Treatment plant. It is no longer practical for all the towns to bond separately for the costs of upgrades to the

system. When the EPA mandated major improvements to all treatment systems that were upstream of Long Island sound, Pittsfield was required to bond approximately \$77million to modernize this facility. Additionally, the new requirements make it more costly to operate the plant than it used to be. None of this was accounted for in the old contract from the 1970s.

The new payment system is based primarily on the number of gallons of wastewater and the capacity that Pittsfield agrees to maintain for Dalton for the majority of the Town.

There are some areas of Dalton that are connected directly to Pittsfield without going through a flow meter. For those areas, Dalton is charged on a per-household basis, with an additional charge for homes with multiple toilets. This is essentially the same type of agreement that Pittsfield residents currently pay under.

Dalton is currently working with the City of Pittsfield to establish a new intermunicipal agreement. Beginning this year, Dalton will be billed at rates identical to those currently paid by Pittsfield residents. In future years, the rate will increase so that Dalton will pay more than Pittsfield. This type of cost structure is normal for shared-use agreements.

We recognize that this increase is significant and will be difficult for many Dalton residents to absorb. The majority of the increase, however, is outside the Town's control.

Because of the financial impact, the Collector's Office will allow partial payments and waive interest for residents who are struggling to pay their sewer bills.

Additionally, the Select Board will likely bring a proposal to a fall Special Town Meeting to move to quarterly sewer billing. This would allow residents to spread the additional cost over the course of the year rather than paying the entire amount at once.

The Town Manager's Office worked with the Berkshire Eagle and iBerkshires to inform the public that this increase was coming last spring, before the budget process began, and the anticipated costs were included in the FY2027 budget. Questions about the increase were also raised at the annual Town Meeting pre-meeting and at Annual Town Meeting.

The Second Issue: Infiltration

The second major issue facing Dalton is the very high number of gallons of wastewater being sent from Dalton to the Pittsfield wastewater treatment plant.

Approximately 33% of this volume is the result of Inflow from direct connections and infiltration of groundwater into the sewer system. Parts of our sewer system date back to 1900 and are extremely old and leaky.

The Town is proposing to use approximately \$200,000 from the Sewer Stabilization Fund to study how we can most effectively repair the system and further reduce infiltration.

This is an issue the Town began working on in 2017. Those efforts have already reduced the amount of sewage sent to Pittsfield by more than 100 million gallons per year.

Infiltration and Inflow currently accounts for approximately 33% of all the wastewater sent to the Pittsfield wastewater treatment plant.

One of the Town's current capital priorities is to do everything possible to reduce infiltration, as well as eliminate illegal direct stormwater connections to the sewer system. Reducing the amount of unnecessary water entering the sewer system will help minimize the financial impact on Dalton residents.

How Does Dalton Compare with Other Towns?

The largest database available for comparison is the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA) annual survey, which covers more than 300 independent sewer systems in Massachusetts.

In 2025, the average sewer cost per household was \$1,259. The highest rates in Berkshire County were Lee at \$1,515 and Lenox at \$1,506 per household. For purposes of comparison, the survey uses average consumption of 90,000 gallons per year.

How Does Dalton Bill for Sewer Service?

Dalton does not currently have household water meters. As a result, we treat all households the same and have one bill rate for all single-family dwellings.

There are several other billing models that the Town could explore. These alternatives would not reduce the total cost of wastewater treatment, but they could potentially distribute the costs more equitably among residents.

Some options include:

1. **Install water meters and base sewer bills on the amount of water used.**
2. **Charge based on the number of toilets in each home.** This is the system Pittsfield uses for residential units that do not have water meters.
3. **Charge based on the number of occupants in each residence.** In some ways, this makes the most sense because, intuitively, more people generate more wastewater.

How Can You Help Reduce Sewer Costs?

The EPA estimates that the average individual resident in Massachusetts generates approximately 50–70 gallons of wastewater per day.

Older housing stock averages approximately 60–65 gallons per day, while newer homes with lower-flow fixtures average approximately 40–50 gallons per day.

Dalton currently averages approximately 139 gallons per capita per day after subtracting infiltration. In other words, our usage is extremely high—more than double the state average. This needs more investigation since we are such a big outlier. In other words is this real or are we missing something? We are working trying to figure this out.

In the mean time, there are several things residents can do to help reduce the amount of water entering the sewer system and, ultimately, help control costs.

Check for Illegal Connections

If you own an older home, it was once common to discharge basement sump pumps into a utility sink or directly into the sewer line. It was also not uncommon for rain gutters to be connected to the Town's sewer system.

The same is true of footing drains in homes built before the 1960s.

These direct connections are illegal and can be extremely costly for the Town. While you may not know whether such a connection is buried underground, some connections may be visible in your basement.

Other ways to Reduce Water Usage

If you have older-style toilets that use 3–5 gallons per flush, consider replacing them with newer, more efficient toilets that meet the 1.28-gallon-per-flush standard.

The same principle applies to lower-gallon-per-minute showerheads and more efficient laundry appliances.

If you have a dripping faucet, repair it. Every gallon of water that we keep out of the sewer system saves the Town money.

If you are one of those people who leaves a faucet running in the winter to prevent pipes from freezing, please stop.

The less we all use, the less we all pay.