

Investing in Infrastructure, Protecting Affordability: A Balanced Approach to Sewer Rates

– By Phillip Peters

Everyone agrees that Bakersfield must invest in safe and reliable infrastructure. Clean water systems protect our homes, our health, and our neighborhoods. These systems are essential, and they require ongoing investment to maintain. In today's tight fiscal environment, how we fund that investment deserves just as much consideration as the investment itself.

The City is considering sizable sewer rate increases that could place added strain on Bakersfield residents. While the need for infrastructure improvements is clear, the pace and scale of the proposed increases may be difficult for many families to absorb all at once.

Every Bakersfield resident is also a Kern County resident, and when sewer rates rise significantly, the effects are felt across our entire community, by working families, seniors, renters, and small businesses alike.

Currently, the annual sewer charge for a household is \$247, a rate that has remained relatively low for many years. The County recognizes that infrastructure must be funded responsibly, but the current proposal would nearly double that rate in the first year, followed by increases of roughly \$100 annually over the next four years. By year five, households would be paying approximately \$875 per year, an increase of more than 250%, or about \$52 per month.

For many families, \$52 a month is not insignificant. It can go toward groceries, medications, school expenses, gas, or rent. For seniors on fixed incomes, it may represent a real challenge. Many households are already navigating rising costs, and sudden increases can be difficult to manage.

A key question is how to fairly distribute the cost of long-term infrastructure. The proposed project will take years to complete and is expected to serve the community for decades. In situations like this, one option cities often consider is the use of revenue bonds. This approach allows a city to finance major infrastructure upfront and repay the cost gradually over time using future rate revenues, helping to spread the burden across both current and future residents who will benefit.

It's similar to how most people buy a home. Instead of paying the full cost upfront, they use a mortgage to spread payments over time. This makes large, long-term investments more manageable and avoids sudden financial strain.

This type of long-term financing can help avoid sharp, immediate increases while still ensuring that critical infrastructure moves forward. It reflects a balanced approach, one that aligns costs more closely with the generations who will benefit from the investment.

It is true that sewer rates have been relatively low. However, past affordability does not require sudden increases in the future. A more gradual and predictable path forward can allow families to plan ahead while still meeting infrastructure needs.

Affordability should remain a central consideration. When increases happen too quickly, even necessary investments can become burdensome. A thoughtful approach can help maintain both financial stability for residents and progress on essential projects.

Bakersfield can invest in strong infrastructure while also protecting affordability. These goals can and should go hand in hand. By exploring balanced funding strategies and long-term planning tools, we can move forward in a way that is both responsible and fair.

Our residents deserve reliable infrastructure, clear communication, and a funding approach they can reasonably sustain. For these reasons, I supported the County's protest at the April 22, 2026, City Council meeting, and I continue to advocate for a more measured and balanced path forward on sewer rate adjustments.