

BEFORE THE FLORIDA PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

In re: Application to amend water tariff to allow collection of customer deposits by O&S Water Company, Inc. | DOCKET NO. 070366-WU
ORDER NO. PSC-07-0813-TRF-WU
ISSUED: October 10, 2007

The following Commissioners participated in the disposition of this matter:

LISA POLAK EDGAR, Chairman
MATTHEW M. CARTER II
KATRINA J. McMURRIAN
NANCY ARGENZIANO
NATHAN A. SKOP

ORDER APPROVING REVISED TARIFF SHEET FOR CUSTOMER DEPOSITS

BY THE COMMISSION:

Background

O&S Water Company, Inc. (O&S or utility) is a Class A water utility serving approximately 2,120 water customers in Osceola County.¹ On June 7, 2007, the utility filed a proposed tariff sheet and requested approval to implement customer deposits.

On July 19, 2007, our staff filed an initial recommendation to approve the utility's request. However, because we needed further clarification and additional information, we suspended the utility's tariff filing by Order No. PSC-07-0682-PCO-WU, issued August 22, 2007.

To obtain additional clarification and information, our staff sent a data request to the utility on August 3, 2007. The utility responded to this data request on August 22, 2007.

This Order addresses the utility's requested tariff changes. We have jurisdiction pursuant to Section 367.091, Florida Statutes (F.S.).

¹ We granted O&S its original Certificate No. 510-W in Order No. 20583, issued January 10, 1989, in Docket No. 870392-WU, In re: Objection to Application of C&S Water Company for a water certificate in Osceola County. We approved the transfer of majority organizational control and established rate base for transfer purposes, in Order No. PSC-92-0204-FOF-WU, issued April 14, 1992, in Docket No. 910895-WU, In re: Application for transfer of majority organizational control of C&S Water Company's Certificate No. 510-W in Osceola County from Doug Stewart and the Estate of Jack Chernau to Douglas B. Stewart. By Order No. PSC-92-1339-FOF-WU, issued November 18, 1992, in Docket No. 920941-WU, In re: Request for name change on Certificate No. 510-W in Osceola County from C&S Water Company to O&S Water Company, we approved the utility's request to change its name.

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Revised Tariff Sheet for Customer Deposits

A. Initial Customer Deposits

The purpose of initial customer deposits is to establish credit with the utility. Rule 25-30.311(1), F.A.C., sets forth criteria for the establishment of credit for customers. The criteria include: (a) furnishing a satisfactory guarantor, (b) paying a cash deposit, or (c) furnishing an irrevocable letter of credit from a bank or a surety bond. Specifically, Rule 25-30.311(1), F.A.C., states:

Each company's tariff shall contain their specific criteria for determining the amount of initial deposit. Each utility may require an applicant for service to satisfactorily establish credit, but such establishment of credit shall not relieve the customer from complying with the utilities' rules for prompt payment of bills.

Further, Rule 25-30.311, F.A.C., also provides guidelines for collecting, administering, and refunding customer deposits. Pursuant to Rule 25-30.311(5), F.A.C.:

After a customer has established a satisfactory payment record and has had continuous service for a period of 23 months, the utility shall refund the residential customer's deposits . . . , providing the customer has not, in the preceding 12 months, (a) made more than one late payment of a bill (after the expiration of 20 days from the date of mailing or delivery by the utility), (b) paid with check refused by a bank, (c) been disconnected for nonpayment, or at any time, (d) tampered with the meter, or (e) used service in a fraudulent or unauthorized manner.

In addition, the utility is required to pay interest on all customer deposits pursuant to Rule 25-30.311(4), F.A.C.

Although the utility currently does not have a tariff charge for initial customer deposits, by Order No. PSC-06-0823-TRF-WU, issued October 6, 2006, we approved a late payment charge of \$5 for O&S.² In that order, we stated:

Presently, our rules provide that late payers may be required by the utility to provide an additional deposit. However, there is no further incentive for either delinquent or late paying customers to pay their bills on time after the additional deposit. The goal of allowing late fees to be charged by a utility is two fold: to encourage current and future customers to pay their bills on time; and, if payment is not made on time, to insure that the cost associated with collecting late payments is not passed on to the customers who pay on time.

Thus, we have recognized that customer deposits may be required to encourage payment of bills or recovery of past due amounts. Customer deposits are designed to minimize the

² See Order No. PSC-06-0823-TRF-WU, issued October 6, 2006, in Docket No. 060506-WU, In re: Request for approval of tariff amendment to include a late payment fee of \$5 in Osceola County by O&S Water Company, Inc.

exposure of bad debt expense for the utility, and ultimately the general body of rate payers. Historically, we have set customer deposits equal to two months bills based on average consumption. For the initial deposit, the amount is based on the average consumption per residential customer, calculated on the total residential usage divided by the number of residential bills. Therefore, the deposits are calculated specifically by the customer class. To provide a better understanding of the reasons for the two months basis, the billing cycle should be explained.

At the point in time that the water meter is actually read by a meter reader, typically a full month of consumption has already passed. Consumption-based charges are based on past consumption. The consumption period is referred to as the service period, or the period of time from the previous meter reading to the current meter reading. Typically, this period of time is approximately thirty days, if the utility has a monthly billing cycle. However, the cycle time may vary between twenty-seven to thirty-three days.

Another time frame to be considered is the period from the meter reading date until the time the bill is prepared and rendered. This varies among utilities, but is usually between five to seven days. Payment is due 20 days from the date the bill has been mailed or presented, consistent with Rule 25-30.335(4), F.A.C. Therefore, the payment is due approximately two months after the service is actually rendered.

If payment is not received by the twentieth day, it is considered delinquent pursuant to Rule 25-30.335(4), F.A.C. At that point in time, the utility may begin disconnection of services. Pursuant to Rule 25-30.320(2)(g), F.A.C., a utility may discontinue service for nonpayment of bills, provided the customer has been provided at least five-working days' written notice, and there has been a diligent attempt to have the customer comply. Thus, the service cannot be disconnected until well after two months subsequent to the bill being rendered. Also, an additional month's usage has already been provided to the delinquent customer, and presumably another month's bill has been issued by the time service can be disconnected.

Not only is collecting a customer deposit to recover this two-month period of service consistent with our past practice, it is also consistent with one of the fundamental principals of rate making - ensuring that the cost of providing service is recovered from the cost causer.³ If utilities do not collect adequate deposits to cover the cost of providing service, the result would be an increase in its bad debt expense. Ultimately, the bad debt expense is included in the utility's revenue requirement, and, therefore, is included in the service rates charged to the general body of ratepayers.

The methodology addressed above for calculating initial customer deposits is also consistent with the methodologies for natural gas utilities (Rule 25-7.083, F.A.C.) and electric utilities (Rule 25-6.097, F.A.C.).

A schedule of the utility's requested deposits follows:

³ See Order No. PSC-96-1147-FOF-WS, issued on September 12, 1996, in Docket No. 951258-WS, In re: Application for rate increase in Brevard County by Florida Cities Water Company (Barefoot Bay Division).

| <u>Residential Customer Deposits</u> | |
|--|--------------------------------|
| <u>Meter Size</u> | <u>Proposed Water Deposits</u> |
| All Meter Sizes | \$73.00 |
| <u>General Service Customer Deposits</u> | |
| All Meter Sizes | 2 x average bill |

According to information supplied by the utility, the average residential monthly bill per customer from May 2006 to May 2007 was \$36.47. Therefore, the proposed deposit is equal to two times the average residential bill or \$73.

In response to our staff's data request, the utility indicated that from June 2006 through May 2007 the utility had a total of 4,147 late payments. In addition, the current total for the utility's accounts over 120 days old is \$6,017.49. Over the past four years, O&S has only reported Bad Debt Expense once in its annual reports. Therefore, we believe O&S is attempting to be diligent in keeping bad debt expense at a minimum by not only receiving approval for late payment fees, but also requesting initial customer deposits. In 2005, O&S reported \$1,613 in bad debt expenses. Maintaining a minimal bad debt expense amount provides added protection and benefits to the utility, as well as the general body of ratepayers. It also insures that the costs are recovered from the cost causer.

Based on the above, the Third Revised Sheet No. 13.0 for water service filed June 7, 2007, shall be approved as filed because it is both consistent with our past practice and meets the requirements of Rule 25-30.311, F.A.C. The tariff sheet shall be implemented on or after the stamped approval date on the tariff sheet, pursuant to Rule 25-30.475(2), F.A.C., if no protest is filed, the proposed customer notice has been approved by our staff, and the customers have received the approved notice.

2. New or Additional Deposits from Existing Customers

In the utility's application requesting approval of initial customer deposits, O&S did not address new or additional deposits from existing customers. However, in response to our staff's data request, the utility indicated that for simplicity, it was the utility's original intent to charge the same deposit amount as it would charge to new customers. This is not appropriate.

Pursuant to Rule 25-30.311(7), F.A.C.:

A utility may require, upon reasonable written notice of not less than 30 days, such request or notice being separate and apart from any bill for service, a new deposit, where previously waived or returned, or an additional deposit, in order to secure payment of current bills; provided, however, that the total amount of the required deposit should not exceed an amount equal to the average actual charge

for water and/or wastewater service for two billing periods for the 12-month period immediately prior to the date of notice. In the event the customer has had service less than 12 months, then the utility shall base its new or additional deposit upon the average monthly billing available.

Although subsection seven does not provide specific guidance as to when a utility collects a new or additional deposit, historically, utilities have applied this rule to current customers who would not qualify for a refund of a deposit pursuant to Rule 25-30.311(5), F.A.C.

We find that the utility may request a new or additional deposit when a current customer, in the preceding 12 months: (a) made more than one late payment of a bill (after expiration of 20 days from the date of mailing or delivery by the utility), (b) paid with check refused by a bank, (c) has been disconnected for nonpayment, (d) at any time tampered with the meter, or (e) used service in a fraudulent or unauthorized manner. Current customers will not be charged a new or additional deposit unless they come under one of the preceding categories. If the utility decides to require a deposit from current customers, it must do so consistent with the conditions spelled out in its tariffs. This new or additional deposit shall be calculated using the specific average actual water and/or wastewater charges for two billing periods for the individual customer. Because the utility has this billing information specifically for its customers, the new or additional deposit shall be based on the customer's actual usage over the preceding 12-month period. In comparison, the initial deposits requested by the utility are based on the average consumption of the rate class, since there is no billing history for new customers.

The methodology of basing new or additional deposits on the actual average of two months is also consistent with the methodologies for determining customer deposits for natural gas utilities (Rule 25-7.083, F.A.C.), and electric utilities (Rule 25-6.097, F.A.C.). In response to a complaint over customer deposits between Sears/K-Mart and FPL, our staff initiated a Review of Customer Deposit Procedures for the five investor owned electric utilities. The purpose was to determine whether utilities were complying with our rules and whether the internal procedures were fair and non-discriminatory with respect to customer deposits. It also included an evaluation of new and additional deposits. Our staff completed its review and issued its report in March 2007. Pursuant to this report, it appears that electric utilities use similar procedures in the determination of whether new or additional deposits are necessary, and that the above-noted methodology is also consistent with other regulated water and wastewater utilities throughout the State of Florida.

In its response to our staff's data request, the utility indicated that it would not be opposed to basing new or additional deposits on the actual average of two months, if we determine this methodology is appropriate. Therefore, the utility shall submit a revised tariff sheet to include a provision for new or additional customer deposits from existing customers, as discussed in our analysis above. Our staff shall administratively approve this tariff upon verification that it is consistent with our decision. The revised tariff sheet shall be implemented on or after the stamped approval date on the revised tariff sheet, pursuant to Rule 25-30.475(2), F.A.C., if no protest is filed, the proposed customer notice has been approved by our staff, and the customers have received the approved notice. The notice may be combined with the notice for initial customer deposits.

Based on the foregoing, it is

ORDERED by the Florida Public Service Commission that the Third Revised Sheet No. 13.0 for water service filed by O&S Water Company, Inc., on June 7, 2007, shall be approved as filed. It is further

ORDERED that the tariff sheet shall be implemented on or after the stamped approval date on the tariff sheet, pursuant to Rule 25-30.475(2), F.A.C., if no protest is filed, the proposed customer notice has been approved by our staff, and the customers have received the approved notice. It is further

ORDERED that O&S Water Company, Inc., shall submit a revised tariff sheet to include a provision for new or additional customer deposits from existing customers, as discussed above. It is further

ORDERED that this revised tariff sheet shall be administratively approved upon our staff's verification that it is consistent with our decision. It is further

ORDERED that the revised tariff sheet shall be implemented on or after the stamped approval date on the revised tariff sheet, pursuant to Rule 25-30.475(2), F.A.C., if no protest is filed, the proposed customer notice has been approved by staff, and the customers have received the approved notice. It is further

ORDERED that the notice may be combined with the notice for initial customer deposits. It is further

ORDERED that if a protest is filed within 21 days of the issuance of the Order by a substantially affected person, this tariff shall remain in effect with any increase held subject to refund pending resolution of the protest, and the docket shall remain open. It is further

ORDERED that if no timely protest is filed, a Consummating Order will be issued. However, the docket shall remain open to allow our staff to review the amended tariff. If the amended tariff is approved, the docket shall be closed administratively.

By ORDER of the Florida Public Service Commission this 10th day of October, 2007.



ANN COLE
Commission Clerk

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RRJ

NOTICE OF FURTHER PROCEEDINGS

The Florida Public Service Commission is required by Section 120.569(1), Florida Statutes, to notify parties of any administrative hearing or judicial review of Commission orders that is available under Sections 120.57 or 120.68, Florida Statutes, as well as the procedures and time limits that apply. This notice should not be construed to mean all requests for an administrative hearing or judicial review will be granted or result in the relief sought.

Mediation may be available on a case-by-case basis. If mediation is conducted, it does not affect a substantially interested person's right to a hearing.

The Commission's decision on this tariff is interim in nature and will become final, unless a person whose substantial interests are affected by the proposed action files a petition for a formal proceeding, in the form provided by Rule 28-106.201, Florida Administrative Code. This petition must be received by the Office of Commission Clerk, 2540 Shumard Oak Boulevard, Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0850, by the close of business on October 31, 2007.

In the absence of such a petition, this Order shall become final and effective upon the issuance of a Consummating Order.

Any objection or protest filed in this docket before the issuance date of this order is considered abandoned unless it satisfies the foregoing conditions and is renewed within the specified protest period.