

Dear CEO Cochran-Johnson and administrators, and Commissioners Bolton, Davis Johnson, Johnson, Massiah, Patrick, Spears, and Terry,

I am contacting you to urge your support for Dekalb Water Watch coalition's proposed water affordability legislation, including an income-based payment program for water bills, the creation of an Office of the Customer Advocate, and shutoff protections for low-income and vulnerable residents.

The income-based payment plan will provide tiered discounts for lower-income residents, cap bills at 3% for households below 200% of the Federal poverty guidelines, and include an amnesty program to forgive the water debt of lower income residents, following a year of on-time bill payments.

The Office of the Customer Advocate will establish a streamlined and fair process for billing disputes, and direct residents to resources the county has available to support them. OCA will replace the current piecemeal and broken dispute and mediation processes, and will have the ability to redetermine dispute outcomes for residents unsatisfied with their results from the old system. Any water billing issue requiring a payment plan will be determined by and administered through this office. This office will work independently from the Finance and Watershed Departments in order to ensure its neutrality, and will be essential to re-establishing trust with residents and administering just and timely resolution for billing issues.

The income-based payment plan and Office of Customer Advocate have both been adopted into the county's rate proposal, and we encourage commissioners to ensure these protections move forward, regardless of what rates are decided.

Our final ask is for your commissioners' favorable vote on shutoff protections, as laid out in Commissioner Spears amendment. This would prevent water shutoffs for lower income households with seniors, children, and residents with disabilities. This is a moral choice that other municipalities have made to the benefit of their communities, which also reflects the values of community members in Dekalb County. Members of leadership in the current administration have expressed they will not oppose this, but are leaving the decision to the will of the board. We hope you make the right one.

A data analysis performed by the Legal Defense Fund last year revealed that along with residents with disabilities, Black and lower income residents were two of the most disparately impacted groups by water shutoffs and extremely high bills in the county. A second analysis completed in January revealed that 25% of residents in Lithonia- a city with an over 80% majority Black population and median household income of just over \$33,000- are already paying unaffordable water bills. Before a rate change steadily increases their bills into the foreseeable future, measures must be taken to ensure residents' right to water.

We urge the administration and commissioners to re-establish trust with residents, and work together with them to establish the first water affordability program in the Southeast, that we can be proud to model for other localities in the region.