Nearly 1,000 Baltimore homeowners are facing a tax sale this month for past due water bills amid complaints the city has limited their ability to challenge billing errors.

The city's tax liens on the properties will be auctioned on May 15. The investors who buy them often charge homeowners thousands of dollars in interest, fees and court costs if they want to recoup their houses.

Councilwoman Mary Pat Clarke said she worries about vulnerable residents, and believes the tax sale process hurts the city.

What's meant to be an enforcement tool to collect debt sometimes fails to yield money for government coffers because not all properties are sold, she said. Homeowners get displaced, which can add to the number of vacant houses.

"It's more than a financial loss to the city, it's a loss to the city of viable neighborhoods," Clarke said. "We have enough vacant properties."

Housing advocates and state lawmakers have sought to put an end to the sales and study alternatives to ensuring water bills are paid. The situation was considered more serious this year than other years because the city's water department changed the way residents can dispute large bills.



The Department of Public Works established a new billing appeals process in October, eliminating homeowners' ability to request an informal hearing with a third party.

ADVERTISING

Lawyers at St. Ambrose Housing Aid Center and the Pro Bono Resource Center are among the advocates who fear homeowners could lose their houses over water bills possibly inflated by billing glitches, faulty meter readings or unexplained spikes in usage.

The city's had a history of water billing errors, such as sending customers bills that were tens of thousands of dollars too high or based on meter readings that some workers made up.

Department officials maintain that the new appeals process is consistent and comes as part of a $160 million billing system overhaul that gives customers more information than before. The department added more personnel to answer questions and help resolve issues and is studying whether to permanently extend customer service hours.

Residents also can ask the department to adjust their bills, which now are sent monthly instead of quarterly, allowing problems to be identified sooner. Forms to request adjustments are available online, and advocates say the department pledges to make more information available in the customer service center at the Abel Wolman Municipal Building, 200 Holliday Street.

"We try to make applying for assistance as simple as possible," said Public Works spokesman Jeffrey Raymond.

The city sent more than 315 owner-occupied properties to tax sale over unpaid water bills last year and 388 in 2015. As of early May, city officials said 991 owner-occupied homes are scheduled for tax sale, but the final tally will depend on how many can satisfy their debts before the May 15 sale.

Henry Raymond, the city's finance director, said he expects the number to fall before the sale as more people pay their bills. About 7,000 warnings were mailed out in February and, by March, the number was down to about 3,000.

Unpaid water bills can trigger tax sales when they're at least $750 and nine months late.

State legislation to put a moratorium on tax sales for unpaid water bills in 2018 passed the[House of Delegates](http://www.baltimoresun.com/topic/politics-government/maryland-general-assembly-ORGOV0000193-topic.html) but did not get a vote in the state Senate before the General Assembly adjourned in April.

A related bill passed to create a task force to study how the city and other jurisdictions can collect past due bills without threatening to take a person's home.

Christina Ochoa, a staff attorney with St. Ambrose, said she is pleased the legislature established the task force as a way for advocates to continue looking for ways to improve the process.

"We will continuously work to change things, but we are disappointed we couldn't get anywhere before this year's tax sale with protecting these homeowners with a dispute process that was fair and appealable and impartial" prior to seeking court intervention.

Margaret Henn, director of the home preservation project at the Pro Bono Resource Center, said the procedures available to dispute a water bill are lacking. She said no information is available to the public that outlines how a customer can challenge their bill to the water department's director or the Circuit Court.

The advocates recently met with department officials to discuss their concerns.

"This information is not on the website, in the lobby or given out by customer service," Henn said. "In fact, none of the legal advocates had even received this information until our meeting last week."

A description on the water department's website leads customers to an online adjustment request form and description of its administrative process for handling disputes regarding leaks, high usage and other problems.

Henn and Ochoa said department officials told them they would make more information available in the customer service center lobby for people who don't use the internet, especially seniors.

"We are hopeful these changes will get implemented and actually help people," Henn said.

*ywenger@baltsun.com*

*twitter.com/yvonnewenger*