



In The News

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THE NEXT CITY

Plumb crazy: Retrofitting Canada's multi-unit buildings with water meters will not only spur a major reduction in water use-- it will also reward water-wise residents

By Lawrence Solomon
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How much did your toilet bowl cost you in water yesterday? Or your kids' bathroom sink? Or your kitchen dishwashing machine? The consumption of water appliances—and how much each contributes to the monthly water and heating bill—is now tracked by individual wireless meters and displayed online for ten-

ants in a growing number of apartment buildings, condos, coops and other multi-family complexes south of the border.

"We've installed 88,000 wireless water meters in 11,000 units to date, and we have a backlog of 7,500 units to go" says Brian Brittsan, president of California-based Wellspring Inter-

national, a company whose business is growing by 2,000 to 3,000 units per month.

Wellspring's 11,000 units represent just a drop in the bucket of a burgeoning North American market worth an estimated US\$17-billion. Between two million and three million apartment renters in the United States already pay separately for their water, according to Chicago-based National Submetering and Utility Allocation Association, an organization representing property owners, meter manufacturers and installers of meters that track consumption in individual units.

Five years ago, billing tenants for their individual water consumption was all-but-unknown. Today, multi-family buildings have gone plumb crazy, with upward of 400,000 additional units sporting water meters each





Plumb crazy, continued

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year. New buildings are now being designed for metering and old ones are being retrofitted. With metering, conservation climbs, too—metered buildings consume 18% to 36% less water than those that don't charge tenants for their actual use. And landlords benefit by removing water—commonly their largest variable expense—from their books, often with no capital outlay: Many metering companies install the meters at their own expense, then keep the savings over the first 18 months or so in payment.

As impressive as this industry's rise has been, its advance has been limited because the plumbing in one type of building stock—existing high rises—typically took routes that didn't allow individual units to be metered. Wellspring overcomes this obstacle by placing wireless meters at every point of use within a unit and summing the consumption at each water appliance to determine the unit's total water usage. As a bonus, the appliance-specific data allows residents to catch hidden leaks as well as slow running toilets and dripping taps, giving them unprecedented control over their water bill.

The water metering industry

has been strongest where water is scarce and water prices are highest, such as the water-short Sun Belt. Florida, to remove regulatory impediments to metering, has changed regulations that forced metered building owners to comply with rules designed to apply to "public water suppliers." The federal government and other state governments are also sensibly adapting to metering innovations and revising rules that prevent a free water market from developing. But Canada has so far failed to catch the wave, even though companies such as Wellspring rank Toronto as #2 in North America's multi-family market, after New York. For one thing, Canada's low water prices—only undeveloped countries still charge less—discourage investments in conservation. For another, the immense Toronto rental market suffers from rent control, which complicates life for building owners interested in improving their property.

Change, however, will come soon enough. In the wake of the deaths at Walkerton, the public has learned that Canada's dilapidated water systems endanger the public health, leading to pressure for improvements to the water infra-

structure. Some improvements have already begun; most are in the pipeline. All of the catchup spending by our water and sewage utilities is raising water rates—Canada's price hikes are outpacing those in most countries—and speeding the day that water metering takes hold in Canada.

Although higher water rates will hit most Canadian consumers hard, the great majority of residents in multi-family dwellings will largely be spared once their units become individually metered: They will then pay only for their own consumption and not that of wasteful neighbours. The wasteful neighbours, meanwhile, will learn to adapt, too. As one early casualty of the U.S. metering revolution grouched after his property management company started charging him for water: "Now I won't be able to run the shower to help me sleep."

Right.

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