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Council votes to raise Tampa's sewer rates

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By **KATHY STEELE** | The Tampa Tribune

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TAMPA - The city's sewer rates will rise beginning next month. Tampa City Council members on Thursday voted 6-1 today to impose the hike, which will be staggered over three years beginning in October. Without the increase, wastewater officials said, increased expenses and rising debt on outstanding bonds would drain the department's coffers by 2011.

Councilman John Dingfelder was the lone dissenter, saying he thought more belt-tightening in the city's wastewater department was an option. "I don't think we should ever jeopardize our bond rates but there are other ways to skin the cat," he said.

Under the new rates, customers will see a nearly 36 percent increase in the three-year period. An average residential bill which now is \$33.60 will increase to about \$39.10 in fiscal year 2010, wastewater officials said.

In three years it would be close to \$47 a month.

Being self-sufficient is critical to maintaining a desired bond rating for borrowing money, said wastewater director Ralph Metcalf. A lower rating would mean paying millions in additional interest, he said.

The additional money will be used to "fix things only and for maintenance," Metcalfe said.

Even with the increases, Councilwoman Linda Saul-Sena said, Tampa will have some of the lowest sewer rates in the Tampa Bay area.

"We don't have too much of a choice," said council Chairman Tom Scott. The city's sewer rates last were increased in 2006 by 5 percent, and by 15 percent in 2004.