

AMR continued ...

“This project will save more than it costs over its useful life,” said Jim Maletic, a member of Padre Dam’s Board of Directors.

Installation of the automated meters has been outsourced to Utility Partners of America, which specializes in AMR installation worldwide. Customers receive a notice in the mail one to two weeks prior to installation of their meter, a door hanger 24 to 72 hours in advance and a knock on the door to assure that it is okay to turn off their water for the 30 minutes needed to install their new meter. Customers are also given UPA’s 800 number to reschedule their installation or resolve any problems with the installation.

The \$6.5 million project is funded through the cost savings it produces: turning on, reading, re-reading and shutting off meters will be automated; additional meter readers and vehicles will not be needed as the population grows in Padre Dam’s East County service area; water loss will be minimized because the new meters will detect customer leaks and water thefts within days instead of months; and, the replacement of the district’s oldest meters will eliminate lost revenues.

The American Water Works Association recommends replacing water meters every 10 to 15 years because they lose their accuracy and under-register water use. Fifty two percent of Padre Dam’s meters are over 10 years old and 27% are over 15 years old. The district estimates that \$250,000 to \$500,000 worth of “free” water is used each year because of meter inaccuracy. AMR will eliminate the problem.

“An acceptable return on investment is mandatory” said Board member Augie Scalzitti, “But the exciting thing about AMR is how it improves customer service.”

One improvement is the ability to identify customer leaks or unintended water use after 72 hours. Like most water suppliers, Padre Dam currently reads meters every 60 days and in that amount of time a small leak can result in a very large water bill. Data from water suppliers

who have installed AMR systems indicate that over 10% of customers have undetected leaks, usually from a toilet or irrigation system.

Hourly water use data is also an improvement. Padre Dam customers will be able to go online, enter their account number, and analyze a bar graph of their hourly water use each day. This will allow customers to understand how much water they use, pinpoint their highest use and measure the savings from their conservation efforts.

“What interests me is the feasibility of mailing customers a monthly water bill that is on a par with their other household bills,” said Board member Bill Pommering. Like most water agencies, Padre Dam bills customers every two months. AMR equipped meters can be read monthly at no additional cost. To decrease other billing costs, the district introduced paperless e-billing and online account management in June. Over 4,000 customers have signed up.

“Not only do we want to lessen the impact on our customers by providing monthly billing, we also provide customers with on-line bill payment methods plus the ability to access their water usage in real time,” said Board member Dan McMillan.

Padre Dam’s AMR system is manufactured by Datamatic, a Texas company with over 400 utility customers worldwide. It is a mesh network, which means meters transmit and receive data from each other in order to navigate around obstacles to communicate with an elevated cellular transmitter. Padre Dam conducted an eight-month pilot study to test the technology before moving forward with installation for all of its customers.

Santee-based Padre Dam Municipal Water District provides water, sewer, recycled water and park and recreation services for the 100,000 people living in the communities of Santee, Blossom Valley, Crest, Harbison Canyon and Alpine.

###