Commissioners' Journal
April 2, 2026

The Geauga County Board of Commissioners met in session for a work session on April 2, 2026, at 10:00 a.m. in the Commissioners' Offices located at 12611 Ravenwood Drive, Room B303, Chardon, Ohio.

It is declared and determined that all formal actions of the Board of County Commissioners concerning and relating to the adoption of all resolutions that were adopted in this meeting, and that all deliberations of the Board of County Commissioners that resulted in such formal action were open to the public and were in compliance with all legal requirements, including section 121.22 of the Ohio Revised Code.

The President of the Board, James W. Dvorak, opened the meeting at 10:00 a.m.

The Work Session was held to discuss the findings of the report created by Raftelis regarding current and future rates for Water and Wastewater customers.

Director and Sanitary Engineer Nicholas Gorris introduced Dylan Sussman, Design Engineer, giving credit to him for the technical creation of the spreadsheets and information presented. Mr. Gorris noted that he had a vision and Mr. Sussman made it happen.

Mr. Gorris thanked the Board for allowing the work session and said that other Directors will take advantage of the platform to come before them and discuss things without disruption of the regular day-to-day business. Mr. Gorris stated that he hoped to be able to utilize these opportunities to better explain the operations of the Department of Water Resources.

Mr. Gorris explained that the Board allowed the department to hire the consulting firm Raftelis to update the financial planning and rate study that had previously been conducted in 2016-2017. The original study led to rate increases in 2018, 2019, and 2020 with a few more in 2021-2022 for specific water systems. Mr. Gorris explained that when he started at Water Resources, this wasn't the plan to do this, I wanted to be the one doing the engineering side of things. But I must tell you that every day I am at Water Resources, there is something new, we're learning something new, or we're looking for something new.

Mr. Gorris explained that when they did the fee exercise, they learned about fees in history, and upon reviewing the historical data, they uncovered discrepancies along with areas for improvement, which led them to the current rate situation. Mr. Gorris explained that the results of the study are based on information that they provided to Raftelis, including financial data and capital improvement projects. The study results provide proposed rates that are designed to fund the capital improvement information that was provided, adding that grants or things like ARPA funding are not reflected, along with any changes to the proposed projects. Mr. Gorris noted that the debt structure for the department was quite immense, considering the size of the department. Mr. Gorris noted that in 2027-2028, they will be paying out almost two million dollars a year in debt payments, and when you are a $9-10 million dollar agency, that is quite a bit, and debt is part of your rate structure.

Mr. Gorris stated we use rates and fees, meaning that a fee is for a specific service requested, like water sampling or sewer connections. The rate relates to an ongoing user charge, like an electric bill. Mr. Gorris explained that the system is complex, with varied services, like water only, sewer only, or water and sewer, across townships and villages and makes a flat rate difficult. It was noted that municipalities can base sewer charges on metered water usage; the county cannot do this for all customers, as they are not all metered, especially those on wells, which results in a highly varied rate structure.

In response to a question from Commissioner Dvorak about providing services out of the county, Mr. Gorris explained that they have an agreement to both send and receive wastewater across county lines, and that the county owns 22% of the Chagrin Falls treatment plant. Mr. Gorris stated that the Scarsdale system agreement states that Geauga County's rate must be twenty-five percent (25%) higher than the Chagrin Falls rate. Geauga County receives wastewater from Chagrin Falls for treatment and some areas of Geauga County, like the Judson and Chagrin Falls Park areas, send their sewer to the Chagrin Falls plant. In a separate situation, Aurora provides water and sewer to the Geauga Lake area, and there is an agreement, and they are currently in discussions with Cleveland Water and Portage County about amending that agreement, because Geauga County must approve all connections and plans within its service district, even if water is provided by another entity.

The report that was provided to the Board will show that Raftelis gave us a range of increases. A report was completed in October of 2025. We're already in 2026, but between 2025 of that report and 2030, they were proposing somewhere on average of about 35 percent increase on sewer and water rates over that six-year period.

Mr. Gorris said, "I can tell you, when it came back, I was all excited. And then I saw the numbers and went, 'I think I like my job.' There's no way I can do that. I can't do 35 percent. Think about some of our areas like Parkman that are already paying $90 a month for sanitary, that increase would then be $135 to $145 a month just for sewer.

"The information that we provided says I need to go look at my capital improvement plan. Maybe I need to back that off, then clarify some numbers. This will kind of explain why from October to now, you haven't really heard anything from us, because we've been digging. And just when I think we're about ready to go, we find something and go back and recalculate because before I ask I'm going to make sure I have squeezed every little drop out of every corner and nook and cranny to make sure that we're not slamming our users. It's a small population; it's not the entire Geauga County area. Although it's part of our sewer district, the majority of Geauga County is on wells and on septic systems. We have just over seven thousand accounts on our sewer side, only one thousand accounts on our water side. But we're scattered from Thompson to Bainbridge to Parkman."

Mr. Gorris explained there is a lot of traveling; operators drive miles, operate the plant, and drive to the next location. There are a lot more costs associated with it. The packet provided contained two documents: one is the sewer rates, and the single page that's blue is the water rates.

Mr. Gorris explained that the county operates four official public water systems: the Service Center, Bainbridge, Scranton and Metzenbaum. The Cloverdale System, located in Middlefield Township has 49 connections and while billed by the county, is not an EPA regulated public water system, as it receives its water from the Village of Middlefield through a master meter. Mr. Gorris explained the missed opportunity to create redundancy, as the distribution system for the new adjacent Woodsong development was not connected to Cloverdale and both do receive water and sewer service from Middlefield.

Commissioner Spidalieri started discussion about the new development going into Middlefield and whether they have the capacity to handle it. Mr. Gorris stated that it would be difficult to answer definitively without direct knowledge of their systems, that any new development would have needed EPA approval for its plans. To achieve the approval, the developer would have had to provide "acceptance of flow" letters, demonstrating that the utility can provide the necessary services. It suggests that the capacity has been verified and approved at some point, adding that reports in the papers indicate that the township is also taking steps to improve its system and looking at new wells and adding redundancy.

Mr. Gorris explained that they have two pay scales or rate structures, one applies to the Service Center area, and a separate structure applies to Bainbridge, Scranton Woods and Cloverdale. The reason for the discrepancy is unclear but may be due to a historical agreement, different water sourcing costs (buying from Cleveland Water vs. self-producing), or a failure to adjust rates over time. Producing water internally is noted to be more expensive than buying it from Cleveland. The draft proposal, outlined in a provided document, shows no rate changes for 2025 and the first half of 2026. In June 2026, a small rate increase for the service center is proposed as the first step toward aligning the two structures. Unifying the rate structures would also level out how capital improvement funds are collected and applied across different centers.

The plan includes standardizing the minimum monthly water usage allowance to 3,000 gallons for all customers to soften the impact of rate increases. A key difference in the current dual rate structure is the minimum monthly water usage allowance. The service center area has a minimum allowance of 4,100 gallons per month and the Bainbridge area has a minimum of 3,086 gallons per month. This discrepancy means service center customers are allowed more water at a cheaper price. The proposal is to standardize the minimum usage to 3,000 gallons per month for all customers. This change is intended to address complaints from low-usage customers (e.g., single homeowners, couples) who feel they are paying for water they do not use. By reducing the minimum usage allowance, the department aims to "soften the blow" of future rate increases.

The timeline for this change is:

- June 2026: The service center minimum is brought up to align with the others.
- August 2026: The minimum for all areas is reduced to 3,000 gallons.

Revenue projections in the rate proposal are based on historical usage data. The June 2026 adjustments are described as small, corrective actions that will generate a minor revenue increase. In August 2026, the service center is projected to see a 9% increase in its minimum bill. The proposed rate changes are based on historical customer usage data to help ensure accuracy. This allows for a realistic simulation of the financial impact and helps in estimating future revenue.

Mr. Sussman explained that water usage has increased significantly in the service center area due to the hospital, while other areas see gradual or no growth. A query was made about year-over-year water usage trends.

Service Center: Usage experienced a "drastic increase" after the UH Geauga hospital connected, rising from approximately 24,000-28,000 gallons per day to almost 100,000 gallons per day. Aside from this major "stair step," usage has been consistent.

Scranton: Usage has been flat with no change in the number of connections.

Bainbridge: Gradual increases in usage are occurring, with approximately 30-40 new connections per year from the Canyon Lakes development.

Chagrin Falls Park: Some growth is also beginning to be seen in this area.

A five-year rate plan proposes a 46% increase for the service center and a 24% increase for other areas, with the goal of preventing future revenue flatlining and unifying rates. Growth in the Canyon Lakes development is nearing its end, with all lots believed to be sold and only about 30 remaining to be built. Without new development and customer growth, revenue will flatline, necessitating rate increases to cover costs.

The proposed five-year plan (2026-2030) outlines rate increases:

Service Center: A cumulative 46% increase over five years, structured as a series of smaller annual increases (citing percentages of 9%, 8%, 8%, 7%) to be less jarring than a single large hike.

Bainbridge, Scranton, Cloverdale: A cumulative 24% increase over the same five-year period. The department is also considering implementing a perpetual minimum annual increase, like the policy in the Village of Burton, that is an automatic 3%, to ensure rates keep pace with inflation and avoid the need for large, politically unattractive jumps in the future.

Two new fees are being introduced: a Capital Improvement Fee (CIF) and a Residential Meter Replacement (RMR) fee. The department operates on a water fund and a sewer fund, but the water fund has historically lacked a dedicated capital improvement component. Capital Improvement Fee (CIF): A new fee is being initiated to create a dedicated funding source for capital projects within the water fund.

Mr. Gorris explained the Residential Meter Replacement (RMR) Fee, noting that currently, the department replaces faulty meters or antennas at no direct cost to the homeowner, which is an unsustainable policy. The RMR fee will be a small monthly charge collected from each property. This fund will cover the cost of replacing meters and related equipment (which have a 10–15-year lifespan) without sending homeowners a large one-time bill for $400 to $500. This practice is a way to build a replacement fund over time, though some other utilities opt for bulk replacement projects when meters reach end-of-life.

The long-term goal is to unify rates, keep minimum monthly bills under $50 by 2030, and conduct annual reviews of the rate plan. The department will conduct an annual review of the rate plan every December to ensure it remains on track and adjust as needed. This will be presented to the leadership. The goal of the five-year plan is to have a single, unified water rate for all customers.

By 2030, the minimum monthly bill is projected to be just under $50, which is considered in line with or below other regional utilities. For comparison, Troy Oaks is currently $45/month for unlimited use; the Village of Burton is around $30-32/month currently. The plan is designed to be flexible, allowing for rates to be held or even reduced if costs decrease, although this is acknowledged as unlikely.

Comparison of sewer rates in specific areas. A question was raised about sewer rates in Broadwood and Longwood. Broadwood is well water. The sewer plant for that area has a bimonthly bill of $129.52 plus an $8 capital improvement fee, totaling about $68-70 per month. Mr. Gorris stated that he lives in this area and is the only department employee on the county system.

The department will re-evaluate the timeline for unifying water rates to a single standard, with a target of 2030. A discussion was held regarding the existing variance in water rates, which are projected to still be slightly different by 2030. The goal is to consolidate all water rates into a single, unified rate structure. It was suggested that the department should aim to achieve this unification by 2030, as the remaining differences are minor ("pennies for some of these rates").

The sewer system is significantly more complex than the water system, with a proposal to reduce the number of rate structures from six to four. The department covers 50 service areas throughout Geauga County. There are currently six different rate structures for sewer services. The proposal aims to consolidate these into four distinct structures, which is a less aggressive consolidation than what was achieved with water due to the different types of sewer systems in place. There is a possibility of further reducing the number of rate structures to three, pending final review.

Mr. Gorris explained that sewer services are billed at a flat rate per "sewer unit" rather than being metered, a structure that has prompted questions of fairness from residents. Sewer rates are flat because not all systems are metered, making it impossible to uniformly track outflow. A flat rate provides a uniform structure. A standard residential user is typically considered one sewer unit, while commercial users may have multiple units and are billed accordingly. Commissioner Brakey noted a resident in Berkshire Heights raised a concern to her about the fairness of this system, noting that a single-person household pays the same as a multi-person household with higher usage.

The department previously offered a metered option for reduced sewer rates, but it proved to be inefficient and problematic. The flat-rate system is largely a consequence of many residences being on well water. A past program allowed residents to purchase and install a meter to qualify for a reduced, usage-based rate. This program was difficult to manage due to the effort required for billing, tracking, and maintenance. The cost savings for the resident were often offset by the costs of the program. Billing issues arose, such as some users not being billed at the correct rate. Meter maintenance was a challenge, as the department often had to fix failing meters at its own expense. Some residents had the meters installed simply because they were offered, not because they were actively using them to manage costs.

Modern cellular water meters provide significant benefits for both the department and customers, including proactive leak detection and improved water loss tracking. The water meters in question are flow meters, like what a resident with municipal water would have. Newer cellular meters provide daily data, which allows the department to receive alerts for continuous water flow, the example of running for 24 hours, indicating a potential leak. The department proactively contacts customers when a leak is suspected. In cases of no response, they may leave a note, request a police wellness check, or shut off the water at the curb box to prevent damage. This has prevented significant water damage in basements for customers who were away from home.

This data also helps manage system-wide water loss, which is between 8-12% annually. Sources of loss include unknown leaks and permitted fire department training. Fire departments now provide estimates of water used during calls. The department must report water loss to the EPA, and if it exceeds 14%, the department will have to work with the EPA to determine why and correct it.

Mr. Gorris explained that the flat sewer rate is based on a standard "sewer unit," defined as a single household with an estimated usage of 270 gallons per day. A single household is always considered one sewer unit. Larger entities are billed as multiples of this base unit, noting that a school could be rated as 7 to 20 units, an industrial facility could be rated as six units, meaning

that its bill would be six times the standard flat rate. The current rate structure includes a Capital improvement fee of $4.00 per month ($8.00 per billing cycle) on the sewer side.

A new, temporary Environmental Protection Fee (EPF) is proposed for the Bainbridge area to fund work related to a consent decree. The EPF is being introduced to service the costs associated with the McFarland plant project, which is mandated by a consent decree. This fee is designed to have a specific end date, ceasing once the associated loan is paid off. The rationale for this separate fee is to ensure that the specific customers affected by the consent decree bear the primary cost of compliance, rather than distributing it across all sewer users.

The department utilizes vacuum (vac) pit sewer systems in areas with difficult geology, which results in higher service costs for those customers. The VPF (Vac Pit Fee) applies to customers on one of the four vacuum sanitary systems. In these systems, sewage flows by gravity from a house into a vacuum pit, and pumps at the plant create suction to transport the waste. This is likened to a household vacuum system. This technology is used in areas like Parkman and Thompson, where the rocky ground made a traditional gravity-based sewer system unfeasible. The higher operational cost of these vac systems is why rates are more expensive for customers in these specific areas.

Discussion identified which communities are impacted by the "back pits" vacuum sewer system. The communities impacted by the back pits system are identified as Bellwood, South Russell, and Brighton. These areas are also associated with "Great trails" and the Hawksmoor service center.

Mr. Gorris explained the Road Maintenance Fee (RMF) of approximately $2 per month is charged to all users in the Kimberley Estates plan in Newbury, which includes both residential properties and condos. This fee is in place because the department's vehicles use a private section of the road to access the plant. The department is actively working to eliminate this fee by constructing its own driveway.

The new driveway will be located on county-owned property, connecting from Fairmont Road directly to the plant. The survey and design work for this new driveway is being handled by a vendor, Gutoskey. The new driveway construction will be funded from the department's existing revenues, specifically from the operations portion of the rate structure. It is considered a small job and will not require a request for additional capital. The project will also benefit the illuminating company by providing them with a clear, stable access route to service transformers and utility poles that feed several houses in the area. Currently, their service trucks must drive through mud to reach the poles. The new driveway will run alongside the poles, providing direct access from Fairmont Road.

Mr. Gorris explained the function of the backfit fee and the technical operation of the vacuum sewer system. The backfit fee is like the meter fee on the water side and covers the refurbishment of residential vacuum actuators as they fail over time. The process involves removing the failed actuator, installing a new one at the residence, and then refurbishing the old one in the shop with new gaskets, mechanisms, and springs. The vacuum system operates on suction; a failure is detected when the plant loses suction pressure, which triggers an alarm. An actuator can fail if it gets stuck open, often due to obstructions like sticks or flushed items (e.g., cardboard toilet paper tubes). The system is designed to alternate suction between units. If one unit remains open, the overall system pressure drops, signaling a problem to plant operators. They then go out and typically pinpoint the failing unit quickly.

The proposed sewer rate restructuring plan aims to consolidate rate categories and outlines the overall increase over six years. A homeowner will not be able to tell if their individual vacuum system actuator is failing, as the issue registers as a system-wide pressure drop at the plant, which would be detected long before any backup occurs at the residence. The department currently has six different sewer rate amounts. The new proposal aims to reduce the number of rate structures to three or four by 2030.

Two specific groups of customers currently paying lower, incorrect sewer rates will see accelerated increases to align them with the correct rate structure. Mr. Gorris stated that it will be difficult to get below two distinct rate structures due to the differing natures of the systems, citing package plants, McFarland, and vac systems. Mr. Gorris noted rate discrepancies, first, that two subdivisions served by the McFarland wastewater treatment plant are paying $129.52, while the correct rate is $143.34. These customers will experience a faster rate of increase over

the next several years to bring them to the standard McFarland rate. The systems involve multiple lift stations, which theoretically justify an even higher rate than gravity-fed systems. The second discrepancy is that the Aquilla wastewater treatment plant customers pay $112.88, while other similar package plant customers (including Infirmary, Broadwood, Burton Lakes, Newbury, Town Center, and Berkshire Industrial) pay $129.52. These customers will also see a more aggressive increase to align them with the correct rate. Mr. Gorris stated that the final Ohio Public Works Commission (OPWC) loan payment for the work done on the Aquilla plant will be made this year, which, along with received ARPA funds, helps mitigate the rate impact.

Mr. Gorris stated that the rationale for a large initial rate increase is to compensate for several years without increases, though Mrs. Brakey raised concerns about the shock to residents. The proposed rate structure includes a significant increase in the first year, which then tapers off in subsequent years. This initial "jump" is intended to catch up for the lack of rate increases in 2023, 2024, and 2025. Mr. Gorris stated that the department's emergency funds are starting to be depleted, necessitating this catch-up. A minimum 2% increase is planned for perpetuity after the initial six-year plan concludes.

Ms. Brakey reiterated her concern about the large initial jump being a "shock" and a hardship for residents who are already struggling financially. Mr. Gorris noted that the department is still in the planning phase and is analyzing the budget, debt structure, and cost of goods to determine the final rate schedule but added that it is necessary as some areas are losing money.

Mr. Gorris stated that the Village of Burton service area is explicitly identified as a significant financial drain. The department's customers in this area are located outside the village limits, and while the village adds a 25% surcharge to their bill, this is insufficient to cover the department's costs for maintenance and billing. Mr. Gorris stated that they are proposing an additional surcharge and so far, conversation is ongoing and has been unsuccessful with having the Village take over the gravity sewer line, which would eliminate the issue and save residents money.

Ms. Brakey asked for an alternate rate schedule that would give the Board options, suggesting a more gradual, leveled-out increase and asking how it would impact operations. The proposed rate increase is within the 20-24% range over a six-year period. This is generally in line with industry standards, with some regional water systems having higher rates. The department's system is not regionalized, unlike many neighboring county systems. This means costs are distributed among all its customers, effectively subsidizing smaller, more expensive-to-service areas. An example was given of 13 customers on the Plymouth wastewater treatment plant facing bills of several hundred dollars a month if they were billed for the actual costs of operating that specific plant.

Mr. Gorris stated that the new plant under construction is expected to increase revenue by enabling the facility to receive more septic waste, especially since Bedford's receiving facility is temporarily closed for upgrades.

Mr. Gorris stated that they will analyze how spreading out the rate increases will affect the budget, adding that in reviewing the history of fees, they recently discovered previously unknown agreements. Currently, all accounts are being scanned and digitized; during this process, new information is being uncovered, which sometimes initiates further investigation into historical records. It was noted that a significant legal precedent was found where a judge compelled a resident to connect to the sewer system at their own expense, which is being kept for future reference.

Mr. Gorris moved the discussion to a potential senior and disabled veteran discount program. While the department is in support of the idea, the question was asked if the county general fund would cover the revenue loss. The concept of the senior discount had been previously raised by Mrs. Brakey, and it was inspired by a program in Lake County. Mr. Gorris stated that the department cannot absorb the cost of a discount program, as it would conflict with the need for a rate increase to cover operational costs. Mr. Gorris noted that they do administer a small grant-funded assistance program through Job and Family Services and the Department on Aging, with the help of Title XX grant funds. The Department on Aging accepts the applications, screens those applying and then, if they qualify, grant funds of about $5,000.00 are available to help. Commissioner Brakey suggested the General Fund could potentially cover the cost as a gesture to help the county's most vulnerable residents, aligning with the intent of House Bill 96 for low-

income seniors and disabled veterans. In looking into the program being done in Lake County, it was revealed that they are losing nearly half a million dollars in revenue, since the costs are not being covered or subsidized by another entity. It needs to be determined how many residents would qualify for a discount; a proposed method was to cross-reference those receiving homestead exemption with the sewer customer list. The low number of applicants, about ten, for last year's assistance program did not provide enough data to project the cost of a wider-scale program. It was noted that better advertising and press releases could increase awareness and participation in any future program.

Mr. Gorris explained that they recently opened bids on two projects, the Merritt Road Sanitary Sewer project and the Service Center project. Mr. Gorris noted that for the Merritt Road Sanitary Sewer, five bids were received, with an awardable bid that was under the estimate. No bids were received on the Service Center project, and Mr. Gorris felt that it had to do with the specialized nature of the project and perhaps insufficient outreach. The project will be rebid with broader outreach.

Mr. Gorris thanked the Board for their time and thanked Mr. Sussman for his extensive research and spreadsheets, adding that they covered a lot of material in an hour.

MEETINGS

Tue., 4/7 The Commissioners will hold session at 10:00 a.m. in Judge Paschke's Courtroom, Chardon, that will include the Ribbon Cutting on the new Courthouse Expansion and conclude at the Heritage House

Wed., 4/8 Board of Revision, 12:00 p.m. Auditor's Appraisal Conference Room

Tue., 4/14 Planning Commission, 7:30 a.m. County Office Building, Room A334, Chardon

Tue., 4/14 Investment Advisory Committee, 9:00 a.m. County Office Building, Room B303

Tue., 4/14 The Commissioners will hold session at 9:30 a.m.

Mon., 4/20 Family First Council, 1:30 p.m. County Office Building, Suite B168

Tue., 4/21 The Commissioners will hold session at 9:30 a.m.

Tue., 4/21 Geauga Trumbull Solid Waste Management District, Directors Meeting, 3:00 p.m. County Office Building, Room B168

Tue., 4/28 The Commissioners will hold session at 9:30 a.m.

BEING NO FURTHER BUSINESS TO COME BEFORE THE BOARD

Motion: by Commissioner Brakey, seconded by Commissioner Dvorak to adjourn the meeting at 11:04 a.m.

Geauga County Board of Commissioners

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James W. Dvorak

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Carolyn Brakey, Esq.

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Ralph Spidalieri

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Christine Blair, Commissioners' Clerk

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