

**2017-2027 - A Decade of Renewal**

# Strategy for Lifting the Moratorium

DeKalb County CEO  
Michael L. Thurmond

April 20, 2021

DeKalb County  
Contractor  
New Day Project

NEW DAY PROJECT  
WATER METER  
REPLACEMENTS IN  
PROGRESS  
Questions?  
Call (404) 378-4475 or visit [www.dekalbcountyga.gov/newdayproject](http://www.dekalbcountyga.gov/newdayproject)



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# CONTEXT

How did we get here?

AJC October 7, 2016

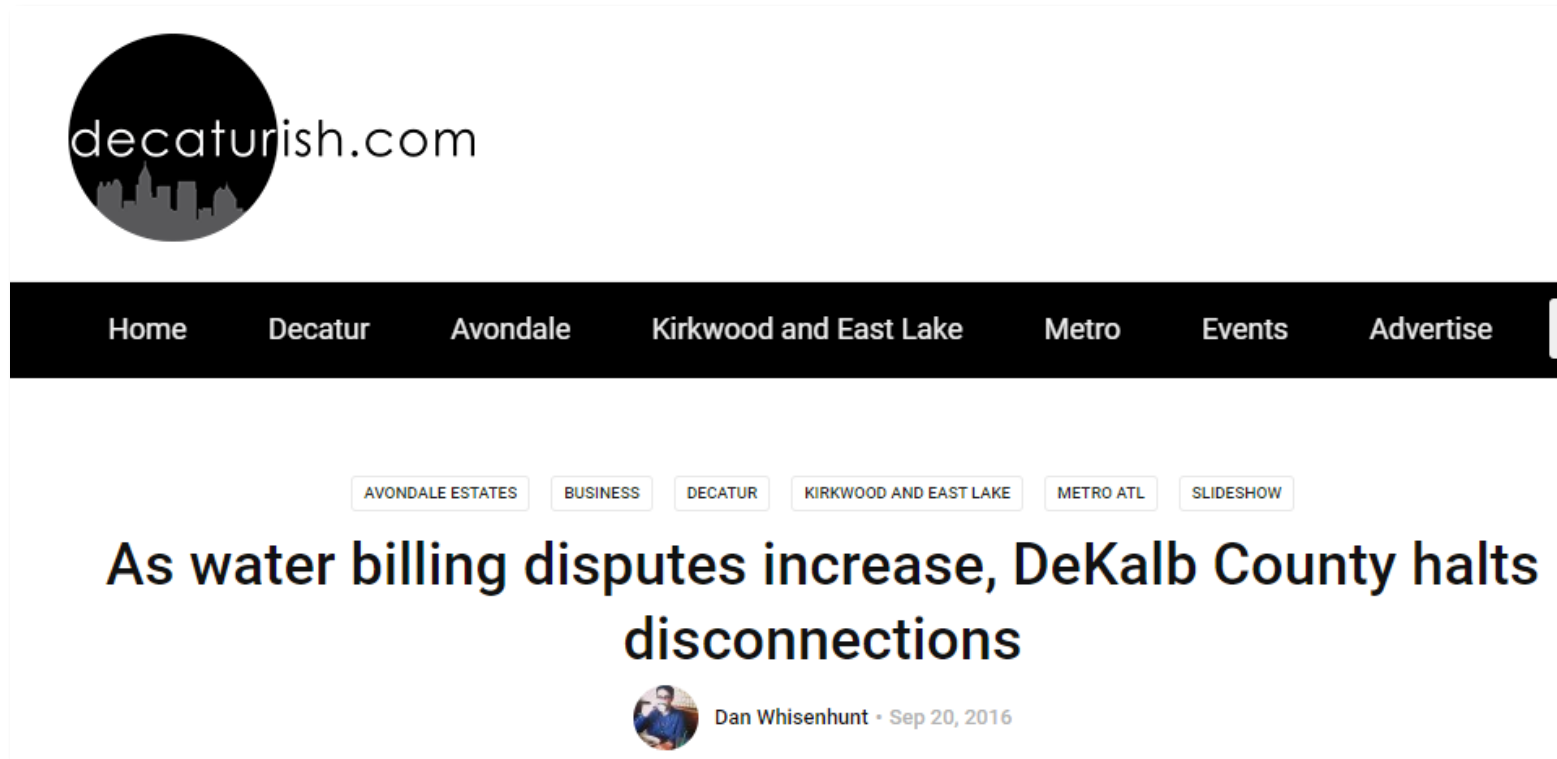
# TRUST LOST



In 2016 the number of metering and/or billing issues escalated

\*Image from AJC article October 7, 2016.

# WATER BILLING ISSUES



\*Image from Decaturish, September 20, 2016

Metering/Billing issues led to:

- *The 2016 disconnection moratorium, and*
- *37,000 held bills*

# The Disconnection Moratorium was created by Executive Order of Interim CEO Lee May in October 2016, and extended by CEO Thurmond



Interim Chief Executive Officer  
Lee May

October 18, 2016

RE: Water Moratorium

Dear UCO Staff,

As you all know, we are under a water moratorium as we work to determine the source of disputed billing issues. Hundreds if not thousands of our residents have called the UCO to have their bills reviewed and meters inspected. Your role as a member of the UCO team is vital as you serve as our frontline connection to the community which we serve. Your actions, tone and approach to each one of these calls can either add to the caller's frustration or help find a resolve to their issue.

At this point, there are no excuses for not understanding the moratorium and what recourse each caller has during this time. 1) DeKalb County is **NOT** turning off residential water service during the time of the current moratorium (which lasts until December 31, 2016). 2) There are **NO** service charges for a technician to come to a residence home to inspect their meter. No one should be communicating anything contrary to this order, this means that the previous \$50 fee will not be charged during the moratorium. 3) Average bills payments will **NOT** include the disputed amount in its calculations. If you do not understand how average bills are calculated, please discuss this with your supervisor so incorrect information is not shared over the phone. If you have been miscommunicating any of these previously mentioned points or have any confusion pertaining to the current moratorium, please meet with a supervisor immediately for clarity. Additionally, our residents have various ways to continue the dispute process which your supervisors have already communicated. If you do not understand additional ways for our water bills to be disputed, please contact Antrameka Knight or a supervisor for more information.

Customer service has to be the top priority in each and every interaction. Miscommunication will no longer be tolerated as we work to resolve water billing and meter issues in DeKalb County. I thank you for your efforts in making this stressful situation for our customers a better experience as we work towards a resolve for each household.

Yours for a Better DeKalb,

Lee May  
Interim Chief Executive Officer

Board of Commissioners

District 1  
Nancy Jester

District 2  
Jeff Rader

District 3  
Larry Johnson

District 4  
Sharon Barnes Sutton

District 5  
Mirecia Davis Johnson

District 6  
Kathie Gannon

District 7  
VACANT

# A NEW DAY

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Celebrating what has been accomplished

NEW DAY PROJECT  
WATER METER  
REPLACEMENTS IN  
PROGRESS

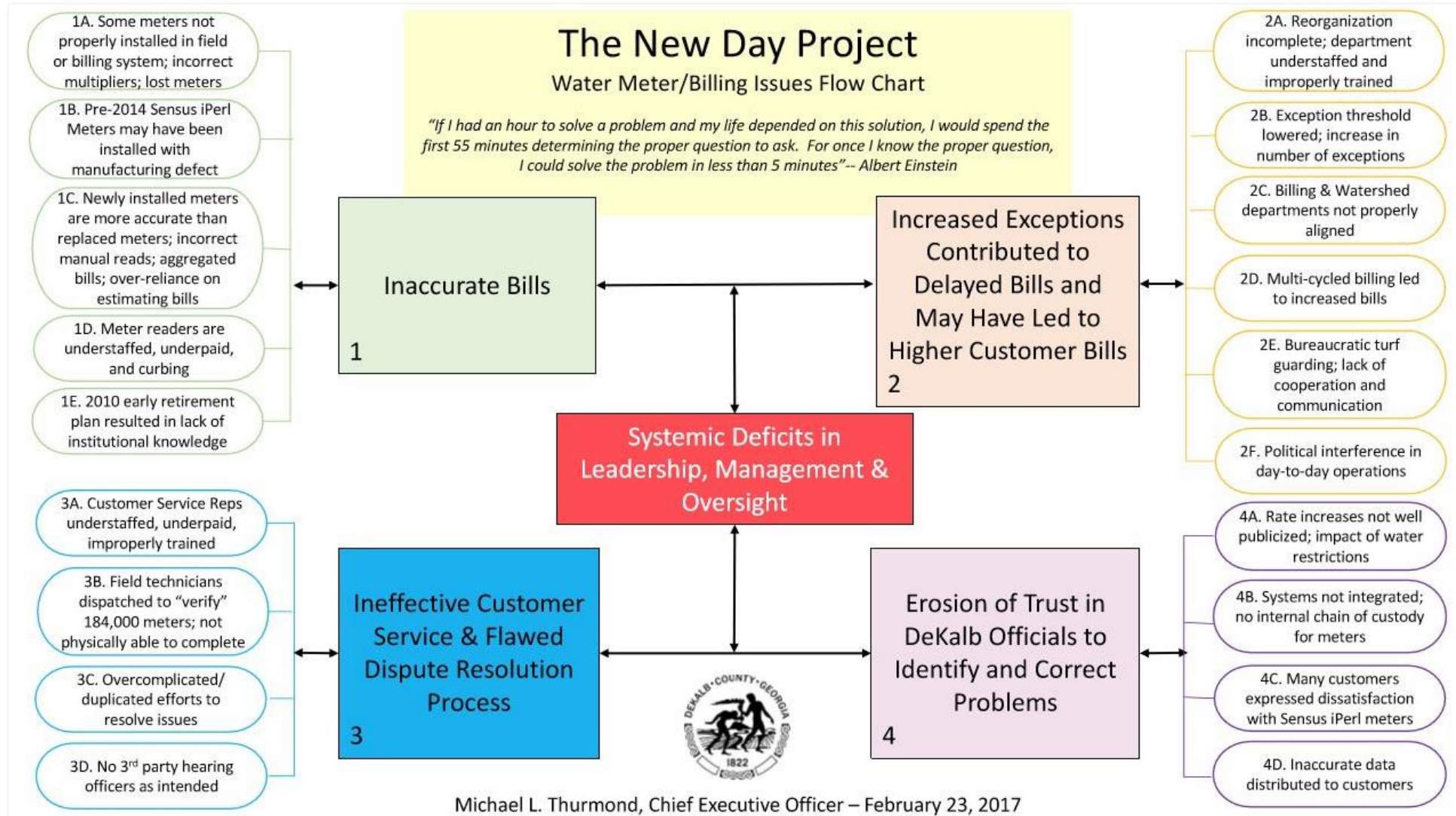
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DeKalb County  
Contractor  
New Day Project

*Contractor working on New Day Project*

# The NEW DAY PROJECT is created to respond



Michael L. Thurmond, Chief Executive Officer – February 23, 2017



# NEW DAY PROJECT

## Key Successes

### Held Bills Independently Verified and Released

#### DeKalb Finalizes Release of 37,000 ‘Held’ Water Bills

*All 194,000 customers return to normal billing cycle*

**DECATUR, Ga.** – DeKalb County CEO Michael Thurmond announced that the final batch of approximately 37,000 held water bills has been released. The remaining 1,300 held bills were released the week of March 19 and all county water and sewer customers have returned to a normal billing cycle.

March 20, 2018

# NEW DAY PROJECT

## Key Successes

### METER ISSUES ADDRESSED

**Over 82,000 meters  
have been replaced!**

- Settlement agreed for potentially defective meters
- All 47,500 Pre-2014 iPerls meters replaced
- Over 34,000 out-of-life cycle meters replaced to date



# NEW DAY PROJECT

## Key Successes

### PEOPLE & PROCESSES

#### Metering and Billing

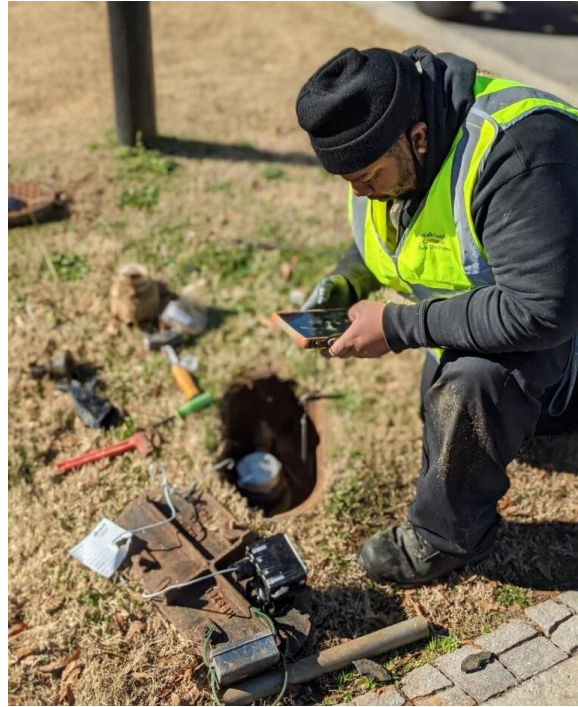
- Additional staff hired and trained
- Meter reading SOPs, checklists and photo verification instituted
- Over 134,000 meters, about 70% of all customers, now have transmitters for electronic usage reporting/Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI)
- AMI provides more accurate, reliable and accessible data



# A NEW DAY



THE RIGHT METER



CORRECTLY INSTALLED AND  
REPLACED TO SCHEDULE



PROVIDING TIMELY AND  
ACCURATE DATA



FOR TRUSTED AND VERIFIABLE  
BILLS

# TRUST RESTORED

## The New Day Project Water Meter / Billing Issues Flow Chart

Systemic Deficits in Leadership, Management & Oversight

Inaccurate Bills - Corrected

Some meters not properly installed in field or billing system; incorrect multipliers; lost meters

- Modernized the work order management system in 2017
- Researched and corrected multiplier issues
- Verified meter operations in the field
- Enhanced billing documentation and account verification
- Updated all meter information within the billing system

Pre-2014 Sensus iPerl Meters may have been installed with manufacturing defect

- Replaced 47,500 potentially defective pre-2014 iPerl meters
- In process of replacing 54,500 out-of-life cycle meters

Newly installed meters are more accurate than replaced meters; incorrect manual reads; aggregated bills; over-reliance on estimating bills

- The number of estimated bills has continued to decrease
- 37k held accounts were independently verified and released

Meter readers are understaffed, underpaid, and curbing

- Hired 20 new Field Service Representatives and 4 new analysts.
- Retrained and promoted existing staff
- Added 1 General Foreman and 3 supervisors to provide greater supervision and oversight
- Minimized curb side meter reading

2010 early retirement plan resulted in lack of institutional knowledge

- Began a comprehensive review of all workflows
- Documented all processes
- Developed and conducted ongoing training with customer service, billing and field service teams

# TRUST RESTORED

## The New Day Project Water Meter / Billing Issues Flow Chart

Systemic Deficits in Leadership, Management & Oversight

Delayed Bills - Corrected

**Reorganization incomplete; department understaffed and improperly trained**

- Increased staffing to improve billing accuracy
- Decreased the billing error rate from 3% to less than 1%
- Added additional staffing
- Added a dedicated billing trainer to conduct ongoing training
- Transitioned away from temporary staffing model

April 20, 2021

**Exceptions threshold lowered; increase in number of exceptions**

- Continue to experience a year over year decrease in exceptions
- Leveraged our AMI infrastructure and improved performance in reading meters
- Many exceptions are independent of any county activity, i.e., undetectable leaks, irrigation, unintentional uses of water and pilferage

**Billing & Watershed departments not properly aligned**

- Completed group training sessions with both the Billing unit and Meter Services Division
- Realigned the workflow of both teams to better address day-to-day issues caused by reading and /or billing errors

**Multi-cycled billing led to increased bills**

- Verify and release bills in a timely manner which has prevented multi-cycle bills

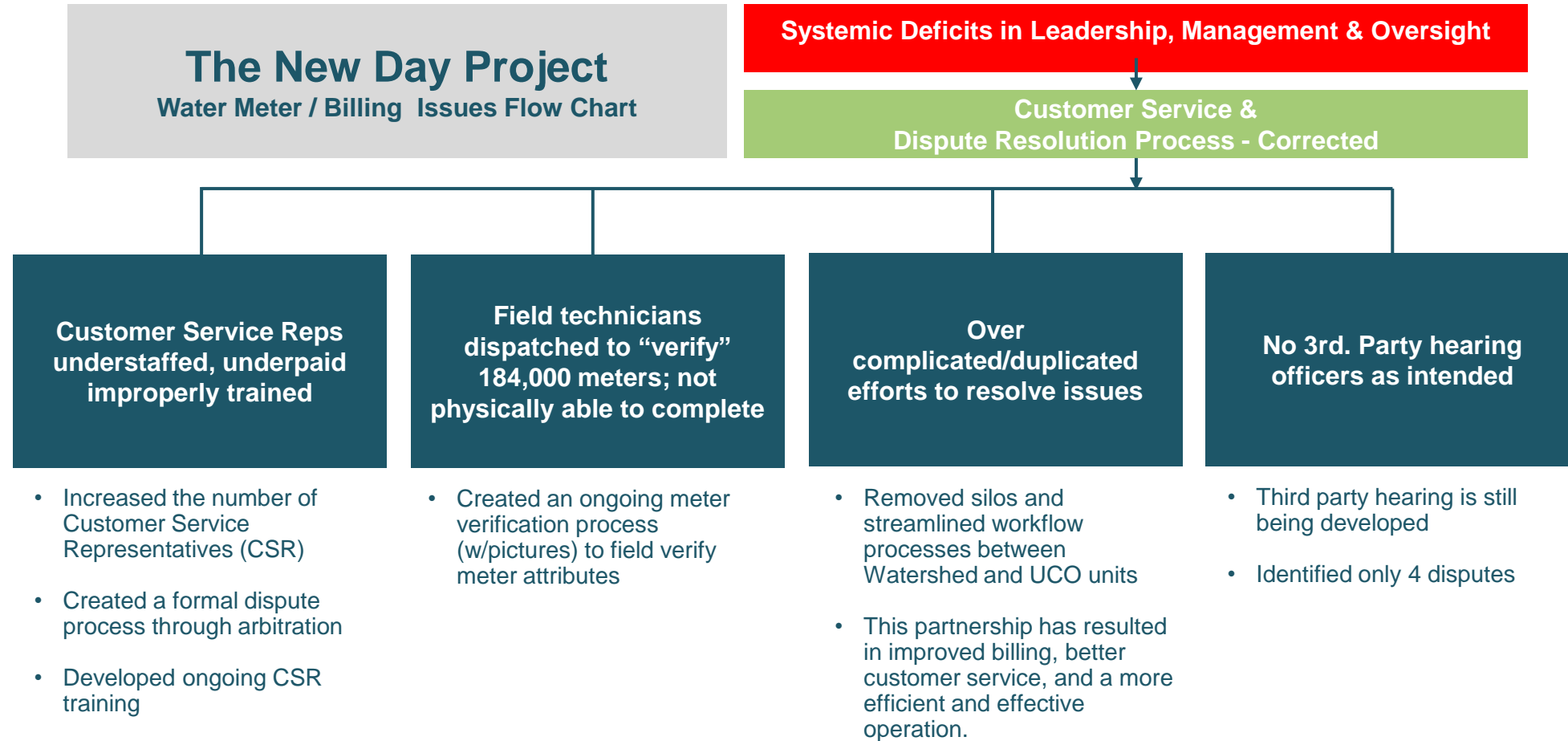
**Bureaucratic turf guarding; lack of cooperation and communication**

- Weekly meetings held with the CEO that included appropriate staff from multiple departments
- Affected departments held accountable directly by the CEO
- Staffing and assignment changes made by the CEO to remove silos and enhance communication and cooperation

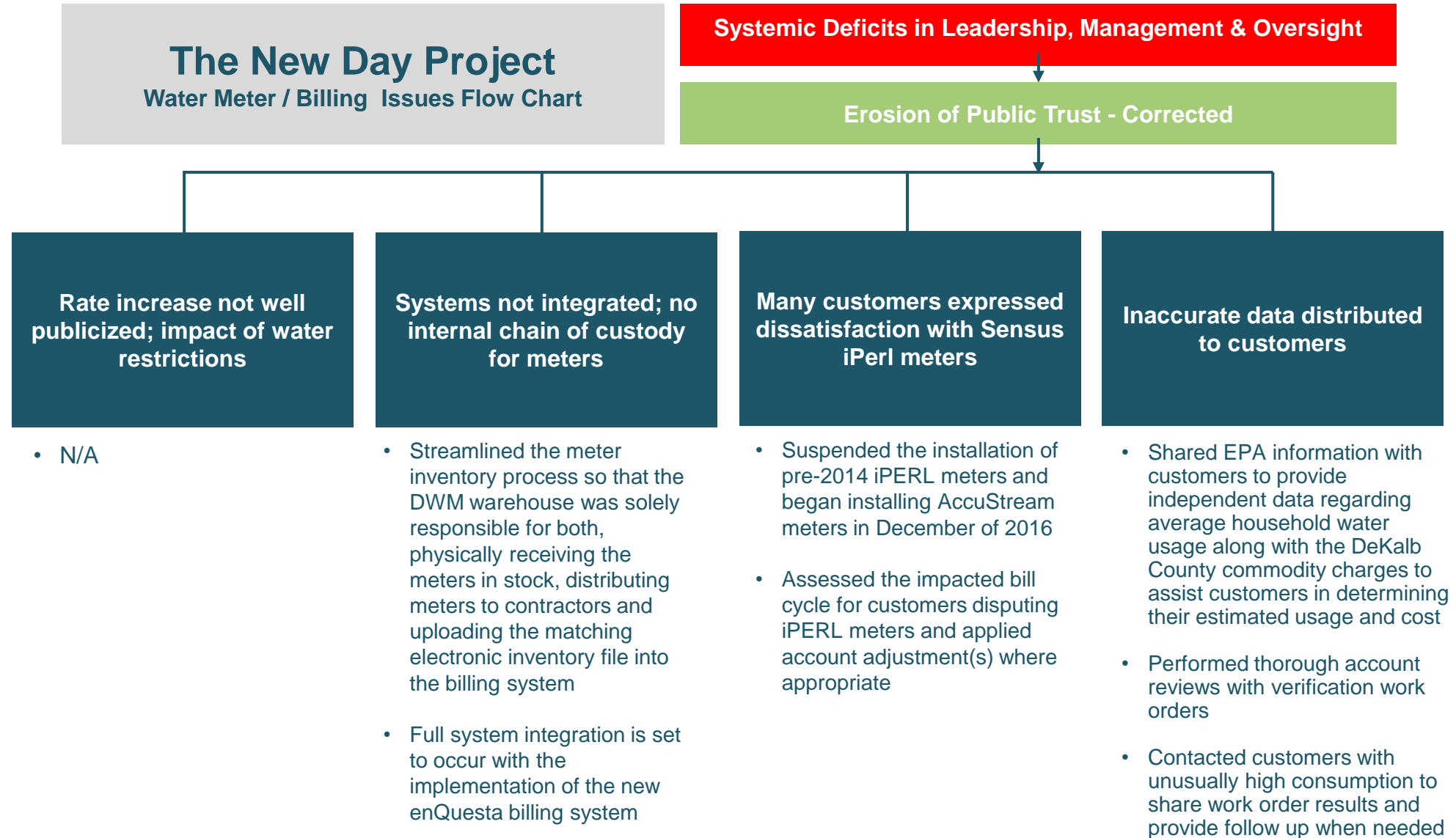
**Political interference in day-to-day operations**

- Regular meetings of the CEO, CEO staff, BOC and Board committees held to receive updates and answer questions
- No outside interference with county departments and operations

# TRUST RESTORED



# TRUST RESTORED





# Trust Restored

**We have gone from over 4,000  
disputed bills to less than 200**

- Out of ~200,000 customer accounts, only about 200 (~0.1%) of bills are currently in dispute
- Reliable and timely data on water use results in a much higher level of customer service

A blue-tinted photograph of a construction site. In the foreground, a deep trench is lined with corrugated metal sheet piling. Several workers in hard hats and safety vests are visible throughout the scene. A large pipe is lying on the ground to the right. In the background, there are trees, a street sign, and a piece of heavy machinery with 'CAT' branding. The overall scene depicts an active construction project in an urban or suburban setting.

# Moving Forward

Next Steps

# NEXT STEPS

The CEO will rescind the Executive Order and end the disconnection moratorium effective July 1, and

The County will begin a thorough Communications Plan.



# COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

- **Key Themes:**
  - The historic deficits in leadership, performance and infrastructure that drove the need for the moratorium have been corrected
  - Lifting the moratorium results in all paying their share
  - COVID-impacted customers will receive special considerations.

# COMMUNICATIONS METHODS

## Outreach over multiple channels

- Outreach to elected officials
- News media
- Multiple platforms: flyers, Nextdoor, GovDelivery, twitter/etc., FAQ
- County/DWM web sites



# COVID PAYMENT ARRANGEMENTS

- **Implement special considerations for those affected by COVID:**
  - Commitment to structured re-payment plan
    - Longer repayment period than standard repayment plans
  - Formal application process available manually or over internet
  - Explanation of COVID-related need
  - Proof of residency (lease or homestead exemption)
  - State of GA Utility Assistance
  - Exploring potential for grant funds for outstanding water bill balances

# **SUMMARY**

**We are ready to lift the moratorium:**

- The legacy problems have been corrected**
- Customers should pay their share**
- COVID-impacted customers, will receive extended payment arrangements.**

# QUESTIONS?

