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**MEDIA RELEASE**

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**Wannon Water's reduced fire service charge still hits hard**

Wannon Water had agreed to reduce the increase in its fire services charge for some customers who expressed shock after recently receiving massive rises in their water bills.

But David Koch, Member for Western Victoria, said in Parliament this week that although the increased fire services charge would be reduced for 35 customers who have a fire service connection, they will still be paying about seven times more than they did last year.

He said that while the Board approved a 44.48 per cent reduction in the increase at its last meeting for customers in the water supply systems of Port Campbell, Peterborough, Timboon, Casterton, Coleraine, Dartmoor, Macarthur, Merino and Sandford, all other customers will still be forced to pay the massive rise in the fire services charge.

"The Wannon Water Board has completely missed the impact that these increases will have on customers, particularly small businesses, schools and community groups, and has been remiss in its actions while having little trouble in endorsing the construction of an immense Tarj mahal in Warrnambool that will no doubt further increase water service charges.

"Under legislation, water authorities are permitted to impose a compulsory charge for fire services based on the size of the connection to the mains supply, but must have any increases approved by the Essential Services Commission.

"In its recent restructuring of water charges, the ESC approved Wannon Water's request to create five separate water supply groups of customers who are now charged significantly different tariffs for the same service, and a new pricing structure for its fire services charge.

"Wannon water claims that this charge, along with other water service charges, allows it to raise funds to pay for the cost of new water infrastructure.

"Previously the annual fire services charge, which was consistent for the entire Wannon Water region, was \$175.59 for a mid-sized fire hydrant connection generally used by small businesses, and for a larger fire hydrant as used in schools, the charge was \$449.54.

"For mid-sized connections the new fire services charge ranges from \$1102.68 to \$2442.80 and for slightly larger connections it ranges from \$1603.96 to \$3553.28.

"Protests from customers in Coleraine have forced Wannon Water to reduce the extent of the increase, while protests from other customers have fallen on deaf ears.

"I have called on the Minister for Water, Tim Holding, to review the manner in which water authorities are permitted to impose such massive increases on service charges and to establish a fairer, more equitable approach to funding water infrastructure", said David Koch.

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