

Not Getting Statements from COJ?

INTRODUCTION

This article considers the various reasons that a consumer might not be receiving his or her municipal invoice and it includes some tips and recommendations for resolving these problems.

#1. NO ACCOUNT

After purchasing a property, purchasers expect to receive municipal invoices from their local municipality in respect of rates and taxes and services. In many municipal jurisdictions, however, consumers need to make applications for change of ownership to the municipality in order for the municipality to open an account for them. Very few municipalities open accounts for consumers without the consumer having applied for the said account. In the City of Johannesburg (“COJ”) area, a consumer needs to apply for finalization to the municipality for an account in relation to start billing for water and electricity supply. The municipality will, however, automatically open a rates account for a consumer. So, if the consumer owns a property in respect of which electricity and water are not supplied by the municipality, the consumer then does not need to apply for finalization to the municipality at all. If you are waiting for an account from the municipality and you are a purchaser of a property, make sure that you have made an application (if this is required in relation to your property, the services you are expecting to be billed for, and the jurisdiction in which your property is situated).

#2. DELAY IN RECEIVING FIRST OR SUBSEQUENT ACCOUNTS AFTER TAKING TRANSFER

It is very common for there to be a delay of 1 to 3 months before your first comprehensive municipal invoice arrives after you have taken transfer of a property. In cases where the municipality is experiencing challenges linked to reading meters, it could even take up to 6 months. You may find that for the first few months you don't receive a bill at all, or you receive an invoice with only some charges and not all of them.

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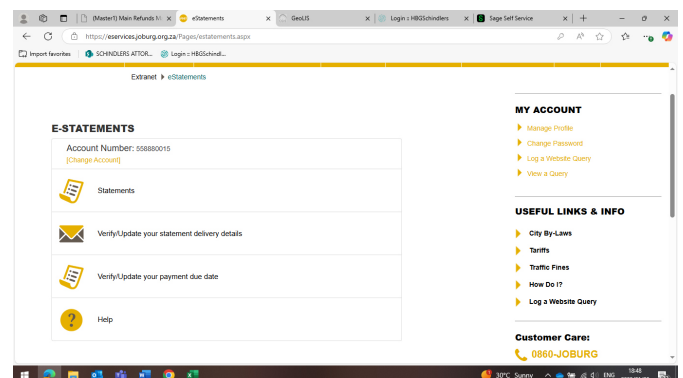
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This is normal and you should only start worrying after about three months if this has not self-corrected. In this instance, you may want to phone the municipality to confirm what the status of the account is and whether you are supposed to be receiving invoices at that point in time, or whether the municipality is still busy setting up your new account and arranging for the relevant charges to be billed to it.

In this period, you should be putting away the amount you expect to be charged for services so that when the bill arrives some months later you have enough ready to settle it. It's a best guess as to how much you owe in the absence of statements, but its better than not providing for anything and ending up with a big bill, and no savings to pay it, three to six months down the line.

#3. WRONG POSTAL ADDRESS OR WRONG EMAIL ADDRESS

If a municipality is posting your invoices to you but has the wrong postal address linked to your account, then even if the invoices are being posted and the Postal Service is working, you will not receive any invoices. Check this with the municipality if you are not receiving any account at all by phoning them to verify the postal details linked to your account or you can check and update it yourself online if you are registered on the municipality's eservices website by logging in the normal way and selecting verify/update your statement delivery details as it's shown below.



The municipality might also have incorrectly captured your email address, and this is why you aren't receiving statements. You can follow the same process to remedy this, as we have described in the paragraph above relating to an incorrect postal address.

#4. POSTAL SERVICE STRIKE

If the South African post office has downed tools or is particularly incompetent in your area, this may be the reason you are not receiving your invoices (even if the municipality is actually posting them to you). Phone the municipality to check whether they are indeed posting your invoices and, if they are but you are still not receiving them, like hood, it is the Postal Service to blame for this.

#5. INVOICE HAS NOT GENERATED

Municipalities sometimes "skip a month" and invoice a consumer for two months after having missed a month. This is rare but it does happen from time to time, usually where some charge has occurred in respect of either the municipality's billing systems or the rates in connection with a property roll.

If you suspect that this might be the problem, phone the municipality to verify this.

If you do not receive an invoice for this reason, you should still pay the average of what your (correct) bill was over the past three months in order to ensure that when your next invoice arrives the following month you then need to make payment of only approximately one month's charges (and not two).

Some municipalities also "close their systems" every month towards month end, for a few days, in order to process their month end accounts. During this period of time, the municipality officials usually cannot help anyone with any account queries and invoices cannot be generated.

#6. ACCOUNT CLOSED

Sometimes municipalities incorrectly close consumer accounts unilaterally (without having been asked by a consumer to do so). In the COJ area, the most obvious indication that this has happened is found on the front page of the invoice, where you will see the words "deposit released" indicating that the municipality has refunded your deposit in the adjustments made to close out the account. If your invoice indicates that this has happened to you, and this is an error, you will need to engage with a municipality to re-open the account or to find out what other account the relevant charges might have been transferred to.

#7. EMAIL SERVICES

Certain municipalities offer email delivery of invoices, which must (normally) be applied for through the municipality's website (via the property owner registering an account and then registering an email address to which the monthly invoices in respect of the property must be sent).

Note that just because you have an account with the City through its website, this does not necessarily mean that you have "checked the right boxes" (literally, on the website) in order for your municipal invoices to be delivered electronically.

If you have an account with the municipality through the website and you are not receiving your invoices electronically when you want to do so, phone the municipality and ask someone to walk you through the process of registering on the website in order to receive your invoices electronically.

When a municipality's website is not working, often it's email service will also not be working. This may very well be the reason that (even when you are registered to receive your statements electronically) you are not receiving the same. In such a case you will need to go to the municipal offices to get a physical copy of the invoice, or you can phone to request that a copy be emailed to you or faxed to you, or you can (if you have an account with the municipality on its website) download your account manually from the website (if they are indeed displayed there and are available to you through the website).

#8. GETTING INVOICES BUT WITHOUT ELECTRICITY OR WATER CHARGES BECAUSE ELECTRICITY AND/OR WATER METERS HAVE NOT BEEN READ BY MUNICIPALITY

This happens where the municipality has begun (but not finished) the process of "moving" over the service accounts (electricity and/or water) to the new property owner's account. The first step is to "move" the service onto the purchaser's account; the second is to send meter readers out to the property to take an actual reading of the meters so that the billing for water and electricity can begin with an accurate "actual" reading, and not based on an estimated (guess) as to what the meter reading is, by the municipality.

In some cases, it can take up to 6 months for a municipality to complete all the steps in the process which lead to the electricity/water charges being billed to the account.

To remedy this, you can try logging a query/dispute with the municipality, and this might help to expedite the process, but apart from this and waiting a few more

weeks, there is little that can be done to help resolve the issue.

You could also try sending in actual meter readings of the meters, to the municipality's email address at which customers are invited to submit their own readings. You would need to take the photographs of the meters with a newspaper next to them, and the photo must be taken clearly so that the meter serial number and reading, and the date of the newspaper, are all clearly visible.

CONCLUSION

Although it may seem like a silly issue to address comprehensively in an article, the authors receive numerous complaints in relation to this issue on a daily basis. It is most certainly not a silly issue as it plagues so many people for so many different reasons, and the impact of not receiving an invoice can (in some instances) be very dire. We trust that the above will be of some use to our clients and the public at large.



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