

Tips to Protect Water Pipes from Freezing

Frozen pipes can burst and cause substantial damage and water loss. Here are some tips for protecting water pipes, including fire sprinkler systems, during freezing temperatures.

Protect your water pipes

- Insulate pipes in unheated parts of your home or building. Pipes in unheated areas of a building — attics and crawl spaces — have the greatest chance of freezing. Pipe insulation is available in fiberglass or foam sleeves. Home centers and hardware stores have sleeves providing 1/8 to 5/8 inches of insulation; specialty dealers have products that provide up to 2 inches of insulation. The extra thickness is worth the price and can save a pipe that would freeze with less insulation.
- Pipes in unheated areas also can be protected with heat. Heating cables and tapes are effective in freeze protection. Select a heating cable with the UL label and a built-in thermostat that turns the heat on when needed (without a thermostat, the cable has to be plugged in each time and might be forgotten). Follow the manufacturer's instructions closely. If you have an incandescent light bulb in your crawl space, turn it on to provide extra warmth to the space.
- Seal all openings in which cold air could reach unprotected water pipes. Especially keep cold wind away from pipes, which speeds the freezing process. Seal openings and air leaks in your crawl space or basement, including access doors, air vents in the foundation, and cracks. The following can be used to close and seal cracks and other openings: insulation, cardboard, plastic or newspaper. Foundation air vents may have hinged or sliding covers to easily close the vents.
- Leave cabinet doors open under the kitchen and bathroom sinks to allow warmer room air to circulate around pipes.
- Let water drip slowly from the highest faucet in the building if you have difficulty protecting pipes in an unheated area or believe your pipes may freeze for other reasons. Ice still may form in the pipes, but an open faucet allows water to escape before pressure builds to a point where a pipe can burst. If the dripping stops, it may mean ice is blocking the pipe; keep the faucet open, since the pipe still needs pressure relief.
- Check that the cover is closed on the water meter box for your home or business to prevent cold air from freezing water inside the meter. If the cover is broken or missing, call the Town of Hillsborough at 919-732-3621.

If your pipes are frozen:

- If you turn on your faucets and nothing comes out, leave the faucets turned on and call a plumber.
- You may be able to thaw a frozen pipe with warm air from a hair dryer. Start by warming the pipe as close to the faucet as possible, working toward the coldest section of pipe. Do not use electrical appliances in areas of standing water. You could be electrocuted.
- Do not try to thaw a pipe with a torch or other open flame because it could cause a fire hazard.

If your pipes have burst:

- Turn off the water at the main shutoff valve in your plumbing system and leave the water faucets turned on. Make sure everyone in your family knows where the water shutoff valve is and how to open and close it. Your shut-off valve may be in the basement, crawl space or closet where water pipes come into the house/building. If you do not have a master shut-off valve in your plumbing system, consider installing one when practical for future use.
- Before draining pipes, turn off the water heater to ensure the lack of water doesn't burn out the heating elements.
- Drain the pipes in your plumbing system by opening the highest and lowest cold-water faucets in your house until the water is depleted.
- Before turning on the water heater again, wait until water service is restored and the water tank is refilled.
- If you fix a leak, you may qualify for an adjustment to your utility bill. In cases of extraordinary charges for a billing period, the Town of Hillsborough will recalculate the customer's bill based on the average of the customer's previous six months of usage. Customers are allowed one leak adjustment per calendar year. Sufficient documentation of a leak must be provided from a plumber or maintenance person, or customers must provide receipts for items purchased for their own repairs. Leak adjustments must be requested no later than three months after the billing date for the bill in question. Please allow up to 10 business days for approval. For more information about leak adjustments, call 919-296-9450.