
Northampton froze its water and sewer rates, but residents still have to pay the piper



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Slowly and laboriously, the public tramped up the long flight of stairs at [Northampton](#) City Hall to the hearing room on the second floor. Some walked with a limp, most were exhausted by the climb. Nearly all will never see 70 again.

By the time the clock ticked 5 p.m., the room was full. They even ran out of chairs, which was a shame because some people could have used them.

City officials sat around or stood where they could. There was [David Narkewicz](#), the mayor, and Edward Huntley, the DPW director, and Jim Laurila, the city engineer. Finance director Susan Wright sat by the windows, the members of the Public Works Committee around some tables. All five members are city councilors. This was the committee's first meeting.

It was looking for feedback on the city's proposal to raise the water and sewer rates. Each would go up by less than three percent. For the average household, whatever that is, this would come to less than \$30 a year.

The rate increases were supposed to pay for lots of things. Streets, especially outlying ones, need new water mains or to have their old ones fixed. There was a fire on North Farms Road and the hydrants didn't have enough pressure. The city built a water treatment plant in 2008 because the state told it to. It cost \$28 million. We're still paying for it.

I wrote a lot of stories about the water treatment plant, but I can't say exactly why it cost \$28 million. There's probably a report somewhere that spells it out dollar by dollar. The equipment is high-tech. The contractors and engineers have to be paid.

A couple of years ago, a firm did a study of Northampton's sewer system and recommended it be replaced. For \$100 million. City officials didn't even wait for the shockwave. [The Board of Public Works](#) decided to do it piecemeal instead. Some sewers are 100 years old.

The BPW also established a stormwater fund. This resulted in a new bill. It spent months coming up with a fair formula based on how much impervious surface you have on your property. If you're looking up "impervious," you probably don't like the bill. When the first bill came in the mail, a lot of people shook their heads.

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For most families the stormwater bill comes to less than \$100 a year. That's still a lot of money for some. Rate-payers complained they were being taxed by people they didn't elect. Narkewicz stripped the BPW of its rate-setting power and demoted it to an advisory board, but that won't stop a 1902 sewer from collapsing.

At the hearing it was pointed out that the mayor's salary was recently raised to \$90,000. Narkewicz doesn't get that now, however. The next mayor will. If he runs for reelection and wins it will be him. The next city councilors will get a stipend of about \$10,000. Some councilors have day jobs but others put in a good 40 hours a week on city business. All of them go to meetings and study issues and listen endlessly to constituents. They're not buying condos in the Caribbean.

The department heads are well paid, but I can't do what they do. It costs money to run a city. No one here is getting filthy rich. People hark back to the days when the city picked up their trash every week for free. Guess how much that would cost today. I can't either.

Still, the citizens shuffled up to the microphone one by one and told the committee they can't take it anymore. I believe them. One woman with arthritis said she takes a five-minute shower instead of a hot bath to save money. As an experiment, I was going to see how full I could get my tub in five minutes, but I didn't want to waste hot water.

Some people said they will have to move out of Northampton if the train doesn't slow down. It's half as much fun to move when you're 80 as it is when you're 40, maybe less, but people have had their income vacuum-sealed and the train keeps a-goin. Personally, I avoid restaurants with \$20 entrees. Other folks don't go downtown at all.

City Councilor Marianne LaBarge proclaimed the people in the hearing room the ones who made Northampton what it is. I think everyone in Northampton makes Northampton what it is, including the transgender folks, the street people and all the oddballs. Including old Hamp.

I do believe some people are getting filthy rich, but we don't know their names. They used to make ten times what their workers made, now they make 200 times as much. They have second homes in the Caribbean. They don't like the light of day, but they sleep at night like everyone else. Money can't stop them from feeling scared or anxious. It can't stop them from dying. Everyone can work on the first two problems, but no one can do anything about the last.

The mayor froze the water and sewer rates the next day. Maybe the freeze will roll over next year, but sooner or later we have to pay the piper, and he doesn't come cheap. Good luck if you live on North Farms Road.

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