
Northampton poor and elderly balk at water and sewer increases



It cost \$28.5 million to build Northampton's state-mandated water treatment plant. *(The Republican File)*



By **Fred Contrada** | fcontrada@repub.com

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NORTHAMPTON — Tired, getting on in years and sometimes hobbled, the city's poor and elderly pleaded with officials from a break in their water and sewer bills, but none of them could stop the leaky faucet of inflation.

The newly formed Public Works Committee of the **City Council** called the hearing at City Hall to hear from rate-payers facing increases in their water and sewer bills. Both go into self-sustaining enterprise funds separate from the general fund to pay for projects.

Mayor David J. Narkewicz is asking for a 2.87 increase in water bills for a projected \$6.8 million water enterprise fund. The sewer rate would go up 2.88 percent for a total of \$6.2 million.

The funds would pay for millions of dollars in water and sewer line replacements and repairs. Some of it will finance old debts such as the \$28.5 million water treatment plant. Some will pay for upgrades to the 35-year-old wastewater treatment plant. Some improvements are mandated by the state and federal governments.

The 40-some people who attended, most of them over 70, countered with a simple argument: They can't afford it.

"My family is being forced out of Northampton," said Ruth McGrath. "We're barely scraping by. Isn't money we already paid being used to fix things?"

Brenda Valle, 72, said she would like to take a nice hot bath to ease her arthritis but limits herself to five-minute showers that might get cut to three. Rodney Kunath, a former city councilor, told the committee, "Many of us fear another tax increase at this time."

Current City Councilor Marianne LaBarge, who read the letter from Kunath, who is hearing-impaired, made her own plea to Narkewicz.

"Please listen to them," she said. "Something needs to be done. These are the people who made Northampton what it is. This is the worst I've seen it."

Several speakers, few of whom identified themselves by name, asked for senior discounts. The rate increases come in the wake of a new bill for a stormwater enterprise fund. Narkewicz gave a computer presentation detailing where the money goes and tracking the funds over more than a decade. The average rate increase per household, he said, comes to a little more than \$27 a year over that period.

But speakers offered different figures from other city officials looking at different statistics. Asked if the city could delay the increases, Narkewicz said eventually Northampton will have to pay the piper and the delay could result in a double-digit increase.

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