

## **Business blowback**

### **Council**

#### **Council delays action on water, sewer rates**

NORTHAMPTON

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NORTHAMPTON — Representatives from Northampton’s business community showed up in force Thursday night to oppose the mayor’s proposed water and sewer rates, ultimately convincing the City Council to postpone its second vote. In a meeting marked by several testy exchanges, the focus mushroomed from talk of fees and infrastructure to a debate about the very nature of the city’s relationship with its private sector.

Three weeks ago, the fees proposed by Mayor David Narkewicz passed 8-1 in first reading, with little fanfare. Since then, businesses seem to have taken notice.

Last week, Coca-Cola wrote a letter to the mayor claiming the rate structure “disproportionately and unfairly impacts our business.” The mayor announced later in the week that he would amend his proposal, reducing volumetric rates across the board so as to mitigate the impact on larger users this first year. The council accepted these amendments Thursday but pushed its final vote to its next meeting, encouraging further discussions between the mayor and business community.

Narkewicz said he stands by his plan — which he has emphasized distinguishes users based on size and consumption rather than simply along a commercial-residential binary — but is happy to meet with business owners and others who have questions to explain his rationale.

In contrast to the current flat rate, the new structure distinguishes between smaller and larger users, splitting the former group into two tiers to encourage conservation. It also significantly raises fixed fees — for the smallest user they would increase from \$1 to \$12.64 a quarter, though there are breaks for users who receive real estate and Community Preservation Act tax exemptions. And the plan introduces new fire protection fees for customers with separate water lines

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above a certain size for sprinkler systems.

Under the revised plan, users with 1-inch water meters or smaller would see a rate of \$4.36 per 100 cubic feet for the first 1,600 cubic feet, and \$5.82 per 100 cubic feet for use above that. Users with larger meters would face a single rate of \$5.72 per 100 cubic feet.

All users would see sewer rates of \$7.52 per 100 cubic feet, and those without separate sewer meters would be charged based on 80 percent of their water consumption.

Currently, all users are charged \$5.58 per 100 cubic feet for water, along with relatively small fixed quarterly fees, and \$6.08 per 100 cubic feet for sewer.

One after the other, city business owners urged the council to reconsider the new fee structure, which they said disproportionately burdens commercial users at a time when the downtown economy is already struggling, pointing to several empty storefronts on Main Street.

“What happens when businesses start leaving town, who do you turn to then?” said John Rhoades, who owns Platform Sports Bar and other Union Station businesses with Jeremiah Micka and David Fortier. “We’re at a crossroads here, folks, and people need to step up and take notice.”

Greater Northampton Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Suzanne Beck said though chamber members agree infrastructure improvements are necessary, the current proposal places an “inordinate burden on larger and medium-sized users.” Based on an analysis conducted by the chamber of about 20 businesses, she said, larger- and medium-sized users would see water and sewer costs increase between 15 and 30 percent and smaller businesses would see them increase between 2 and 7 percent.

“Businesses have been crushed by a layering of costs, all with good intentions, but not necessarily considered in their aggregate,” Beck said.

And considering all Northampton residents will benefit from the improvements, she said, it seems fair that all should pay, noting that under the mayor’s updated proposal some residential users would see a reduction in costs.

The typical residential customer can expect to see quarterly water and sewer bills decrease by about \$4, according to city data.

Fred Gohr, general manager and part-owner of Fitzwilly’s, harkened back to the turnaround Northampton saw in the 1970s, a shift he said many credit the original Fitzwilly’s owner with encouraging, and said he believes the city is now seeing a reversal.

Among other things, he said he fears that instituting a split water and sewer fee could lead to a split commercial-residential property tax rate down the line, something business owners have long opposed, and something City Council President William Dwight later in the meeting emphasized he continues to oppose, too.

When it came time for councilors to discuss the rates, the mayor began by explaining his amendments, and noted that he has tried his best to get the word out since January, when consultants first presented the proposal to the council.

At-Large Councilor Jesse Adams, who was the only one to vote against the proposal initially, said the mayor’s changes reaffirmed what he already believed — that the plan would hurt businesses. He added that he believes it will also hurt renters, some of whom are “among poorest of the poor in our community,” as multi-family units will quickly use the amount of water that would bump them into the second tier.

He reiterated that he believes the structure change requires much more thought, and should be done in tandem with the community resources committee’s ongoing economic study.

“Decline and denial is a lethal combination,” he said.

Several councilors questioned the mayor’s process in developing the fee structure, noting that the

stormwater and flood control fee involved more participation by the public.

Ward 2 Councilor Dennis Bidwell said he has heard from several homeowners saying that, given the substantial infrastructure needs, they were expecting to pay more, noting that he was sympathetic to the argument that all should be taking a portion of the burden.

Stepping beyond the minutiae of water and sewer rates, Ward 5 Councilor David Murphy asked his fellow councilors to consider what drew business owners to Thursday 's meeting, noting interactions between the two groups tend to be confrontational and questioning whether the council was doing its best to nurture a positive relationship with businesses.

“We’re not sending them a message that we love them,” he said, later adding, “we have to better understand the pressures they’re under.”

Ward 4 Councilor Gina-Louise Sciarra pointed out that the community resources committee, which she chairs, is conducting an economic study for that very purpose — to better understand pressures at all levels.

City Council Vice President Ryan O’Donnell emphasized that any meetings about water and sewer rates should be open not only to the business community but to the general public, gesturing to a pie chart showing that 95 percent of the city’s customer base falls into the smaller user category.

“I don’t like last-minute modifications being made only by business interests,” he said.

Councilors will revisit the issue at their April 21 meeting.

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