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Officials seek improvements with water rate hike proposed

By Ellie Oleson CORRESPONDENT

OXFORD— Selectmen made it clear last night that they do not want the Aquarion Water company to raise local water rates by 33 percent, though they would like to see more infrastructure improvements.

Rates in Oxford and Millbury are \$2.78 per 1,000 gallons for residential customers and \$2.05 for municipal and commercial customers, according to Larry L. Bingaman, senior vice president of operations for Aquarion. The annual cost to an average family of four in Oxford could rise from \$325 to \$434 for 64,000 gallons of water.

Company representatives told selectmen last night that on May 14, Aquarion asked the state Department of Public Utilities, which sets rates, for a systemwide rate increase, which would impact all Aquarion customers in Oxford, Millbury, Hingham, Cohasset and Hull.

Michelle T. Desorcy, manager of operations for the company, said that the last time Aquarion raised water rates was in 2001, when rates went from \$2.42 to \$2.78 per 1,000 gallons for residential customers.

The new proposal calls for “inclining block rates” to “foster conservation through higher pricing at larger consumption levels,” Mr. Bingaman said.

The company has requested a quarterly charge of \$3.50 per 1,000 gallons for the first 9,000 gallons and \$4.43 per 1,000 gallons over 9,000 gallons for residential customers.

Mr. Bingaman said that the average family of four would pay \$1.19 per day for 175 gallons of water. “That is about the cost of a 20-ounce bottle of Dasani or Poland Springs at Mini Mart.”

If the rate increase is approved, commercial and municipal customers would pay \$2.58 per 1,000 gallons for the first 9,000 gallons and \$3.24 per 1,000 gallons over 9,000 gallons per quarter.

Aquarion also proposes raising annual public fire protection charges in town from approximately \$103,000 to \$119,000, Mr. Bingaman said, noting that last year, Aquarion paid Oxford \$46,000 in property taxes, which helped offset that charge.

Ms. Desorcy said, “The money to improve the water system has been expended. We’re going in to recover what was spent over the last seven years.”

Mr. Bingaman said that during that seven years, Oxford, which represents 14 percent of Aquarion’s Massachusetts’ division, has received 15 percent of the company’s water system improvements.

Selectman Henry J. LaMountain was not impressed. “Millbury paid 19 percent and got 40 percent of the budget,” he said, adding that he believed it is unfair for all Aquarion customers to pay for improvements in other communities.

Selectman Daniel P. Coonan agreed. “I’m not a customer. I don’t think it’s fair for Oxford customers to pay for work in Hull or Cohasset.”

Mr. Coonan pointed out several repairs need to be done to the system. “There’s a pipe by St. Ann’s (Rectory on Main Street) that breaks all the time.”

Mr. Bingaman said, “If it keeps breaking, we will replace it.”

Mr. LaMountain said, “Less than half of my town is covered by fire protection. All pay for it, but only half receive the benefit.”

Selectman John G. Saad asked why only half the fire hydrants in town had been flushed in the past year, and said, “Some pipes are over 100 years old. I would like to see a plan showing your intentions for the future of Main Street.”

Selectman Susan M. Gallant asked if the Department of Public Utilities might not grant Aquarion the full increase requested.

Mr. Bingaman said that the increase “can range from 75 percent to 90 percent to the full increase.”

He said that a public rate case hearing with the state is at 7 p.m. on July 9 in the Senior Center.

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