

Higher water bills loom for Hull homeowners

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HULL — Proposed rate hike outlined to Hull officials

The average Hull homeowner could pay about \$130 more a year for water under a proposed rate increase.

The average user currently pays just over \$600.

The Aquarion Water Co. of Massachusetts, the town's supplier, wants to increase the water rate for the average Hull residential customer by 21.4 percent.

The average residential customer would see the quarterly bill increase by a little less than \$33.

Larry Bingaman, Aquarion senior vice president, outlined the proposal to selectmen this week.

The rate increase would affect Hingham residents as well as more than 300 homes in northern Cohasset. The utility serves a handful of customers in Norwell.

The state Department of Public Utilities will hold a hearing for residents of the towns at 7 p.m. July 16 at Hull High School.

"This is a significant event," selectmen Chairman Joan Meschino said, encouraging residents to attend or to submit comments in writing.

The state will decide what rate increase to allow, Bingaman said. Overall, the company seeks a 24.8 percent increase, he said, when all customer classifications, including commercial, are factored in.

The company filed for a rate increase in mid-May and the process could take six to nine months before the state makes a decision, Bingaman said.

The process might be completed around December, he said. In that case, new rates could take effect shortly thereafter, he said.

The utility's last increase was in 2001, Bingaman said, when it was the Massachusetts-American Water Co. Aquarion took-over in 2002.

Capital investment in the system and increased cost of doing business are main reasons for the rate proposal, he said.

The company's proposal also includes new one-time hook-up charges, with the charge varying depending on the meter size and capacity. For a new house being connected to the system, the charge would be \$2,550 with the revenue being reinvested in the system, Bingaman said.

Selectmen spoke critically and skeptically of the proposal.

Meschino and Selectman Christopher Olivieri argued that Hull has not received a proportional share of capital system improvements the utility made since 2001.

Given economic times, the proposed rate increase "couldn't be at a worse time," Selectman Domenico Sestito said, suggesting a phased-in rate hike.

The utility's investment in Hull's part of the water system does not justify the increase, Selectman John Reilly Jr. said, citing rate hikes in 2001 and in the 1990s.

Town Manager Philip Lemnios has asked for additional information by July 16, including a breakdown of system improvements in Hull, made and planned.

"We understand the impact this is having," Bingaman said. The utility is working with Hull's state legislators on an assistance program to allow needy customers a credit on their utility costs, he said.

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