

Aquarion Water Co. proposed rate increase flooded by opposition

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HULL — The Aquarion Water Co.'s proposal to increase residential water rates 21.4 percent met a wall of opposition during a public hearing Wednesday night.

“Just plain and simple: We can't afford it,” Hull resident Janet Scullane said.

Larry Bingaman, company senior vice president, outlined the privately owned utility's case for a rate increase. It would be the first for Hull users since 2001.

Aquarion took over the utility from Massachusetts-American Water Co. in 2002 and has not increased rates since then.

Capital investment in the system and increased business costs are among Aquarion's reasons for the rate increase.

More than 100 people attended the hearing at Hull High School scheduled by the state Department of Public Utilities.

The utility serves Hull and Hingham plus more than 300 homes in northern Cohasset and a handful of homes in Norwell.

The average residential quarterly bill would increase nearly \$33, state hearing officer Carol Pieper said.

Overall, the company is seeking a 24.8 percent increase in rates, including commercial and other customer categories.

All rates would remain the same throughout at least this year. The state suspended any rate increase, which the company sought in May, until April 1, Pieper said.

Four Hull selectmen, Town Manager Philip Lemnios and Cohasset Selectman Paul Carlson were among officials who spoke against the increase.

Aquarion's rates are higher than those of the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority, which supplies water to much of the Boston area, Hingham Selectman Bruce Rabuffo said.

“We find this request overwhelming, to say the least,” he said.

Patrick Cannon of Hull's municipal light board said, “It's kind of a sad state of affairs. We've actually reached the point where it's cheaper to drink beer.”

State Sen. Robert Hedlund, R-Weymouth, and state Rep. Garrett Bradley, D-Hingham, also spoke against the increase. The legislators sent a joint letter of opposition to state utility commissioners, who will decide on the rate increase.

Hedlund commended the company for working with legislators on trying to keep alive a water-rate subsidy program for needy customers.

Some residents complained about water quality, including Shelley Fortier of Hull, who said she drinks bottled water to avoid the strong chlorinated water from her tap.

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