



WSCAC/MWRA Advisory Board Meeting

Location: Wellesley Free Library
Wellesley, MA
November 21, 2019—11:30 A.M.

Members in Bold in Attendance:

Michael Baram, WSCAC Chair

Whitney Beals, NE Forestry Foundation
William Copithorne, Town of Arlington
Steven Daunais, Tata & Howard
Andrea Donlon, CT River Conservancy
Gerald Eves, Trout Unlimited
Bill Fadden, OARS

Bill Kiley, BWSC

Paul Lauenstein, NepRWA
Martha Morgan, Nashua River Watershed
Martin Pillsbury, MAPC
Janet Rothrock, League of Women Voters
Kurt Tramosch, Wayland Wells
Roger Wrubel, Mass Audubon

Non-Members in Attendance:

Lexi Dewey, WSCAC
Members of the MWRA Advisory Board

WSCAC Business

Martha Davis, JD, Northeastern law professor and lead author of the report "A Drop in the Bucket: Water Affordability Policies in Twelve Massachusetts Communities" spoke about ensuring affordability in with rising water rates. She noted that the intention of the rate survey project was to look at both affordability (overall water cost) and assistance plans (targeted discounts for specific situations). In the communities studied, there were several assistance or discount plans. The authors also found several discrepancies between the information available from the MWRA Advisory Board data vs. data from communities, specifically in Brookline and Somerville. Davis noted that accurate data is essential to understand the programs that are available to the public.

None of the communities surveyed offer assistance based on income alone. Most of the discounts were focused towards senior owner-occupants, some based on income and others offering all senior owner-occupants a discount. None offered discounts to renters. Some communities use shut-offs to enforce water payment, while others use liens. Again, data was inconsistent and not clear enough to draw definitive conclusions on how many households are affected by shut-offs or liens.

If a household falls behind on water bills, payment plans, if any, are varied in their accessibility. Some towns work to provide payment plans, others expect households to work with community collections or the tax office to resolve the issue. The presenter pointed out that in several states, steps are being taken to help renters by offering discounts to landlords, to reduce rent costs. Philadelphia, specifically, offers a tiered assistance plan. Launched in 2017, it offers tiers of payment plans based on income, and with allowances for short-term assistance.

Given the critical nature of water and its increasing costs, there is hope that Massachusetts will consider innovative steps to ensure water affordability to residents.

Mariana Sarongo, a population health doctoral student at Northeastern working with Martha Davis, has been studying the human health effects of rising water rates. Her team interviewed 22 residents with a water bill that is greater than 4.5% of their household income. The participants were predominantly Latinx, female, with a high school education, and a mean age of 57 years. The mean income is approximately 51k/year. The interview questions to residents attempted to isolate the effects of the water bills, as opposed to other household bills. After housing costs, water bills were reported as the highest bill, and are consistent throughout the year (as opposed to electric or gas bills, which tend to fluctuate). Additionally, there is generally little or no assistance for payment of water bills, and payment options, if any, are more complicated. Paying a bill over the phone is not available and often, residents are required to go in to the town office to pay an overdue bill.

Respondents' coping strategies include reducing household water use - reducing laundry, taking laundry to a laundromat, limiting shower time, even for tenants, decreasing gardening (which is problematic for households who would typically grow some of their food to reduce their grocery bills), even flushing toilets less. They also acknowledged that they're attempting to reduce other bills, such as buying less or lower quality food, trying to lower other utility bills, and cutting back on necessary health care visits and prescriptions, which is problematic for those with chronic health issues. Other bills often go unpaid, and many respondents had second jobs or worked overtime to ensure water bills were paid. Additionally, bills often include extra costs such as late fees or paying to get water turned back on after a shut-off.

The stress of these factors have adverse effects on the interviewees, causing negative health impacts including going without health care, not eating well enough, or dealing with insomnia or shame over the inability to afford housing, childcare, and other costs.

An audience member asked whether these households have access to some of the newer water-saving devices. Mariana responded that some residents have these devices provided through the municipality, but certainly not all of them do. Another question was how the interviews are able to separate the stress and anxiety of the water bill specifically, vs the stress of other household bills. Mariana responded that their survey questions and answers focused primarily on the effects of water rates.

Paul Lauenstein commented that there's a competing interest - MWRA needs to raise enough money to pay for infrastructure and upkeep on the water system, vs the essential human right to water - and suggested that one part of the solution might have to do with ascending block water rates where people of limited means can control their own water use and keep their bills at a minimum by removing the fixed base component. Another audience member suggested widening the survey and looking more closely at the effect of water rates in smaller communities.

Patrick Fasanella, a member of the Board of Sewer and Water Commissioners for Walpole, MA, asked about placing liens on the property. The response was that from a financial standpoint, that may be a sound option, but that liens cause further issues for families, and for other bills, there are other options before liens, but water bills tend to not have enough options to help households pay.

Kurt Tramosch shared a story about a surprise lien his local water department placed on his former home in 1988 for a \$9.00 overlooked payment while he was travelling on a family trip. Although paid immediately on return, the South Middlesex Registry of Deeds to this day does not indicate a release

on this lien. He commented that liens can lead to third parties being sold that debt, and seeing homes auctioned off to pay off water bills.

Professor Davis and Ms. Sarongo were thanked for their presentations.

MWRA Advisory Board presentation-James Gioud

James Gioud presented draft data for the 2019 MWRA Advisory Board Annual Water & Sewer Rates survey. Staff is waiting for updated data on a few final communities. James shared the average combined water and sewer bill annually in the MWRA service area, which is currently \$1660 for this calendar year (last year was \$1600). For the water bill alone, the average residential usage last year was \$880. This year the average is \$867 (see last pages of these minutes for graphics).

The data is helpful at looking for possible trends in communities, but isn't as effective in comparing communities to each other. To resolve this problem, the Advisory Board uses the industry standard of 120 HCF (hundred cubic feet per household per year) used by the American Water Works Association. As the standard, it allows for a comparison of data.

James offered a layout of the spread of communities that were significantly below, at, or above the average. Woburn is the only remaining community that charges a flat rate, and without metering. Winthrop on the other hand, has combined their water and sewer enterprise accounts, which means that the Adv. Board has to calculate their averages differently.

The survey also reviewed MA communities that are outside of the MWRA service area as well as several cities around the country. The combined annual water and sewer rates for local communities averaged at just under \$1300, while national communities averaged around \$1400 per year.

The Advisory Board will be sending electronic copies of the survey this year, rather than flash drives. Data will be posted on the website.

A question was asked regarding water and sewer rate changes in Peabody. James commented that Peabody is both on a tiered system and also did experience rate changes. Another audience member mentioned that Peabody is undergoing some capital projects which are being funded through a rate increase.

A question was asked about the lowest vs the highest block rates, for a breakdown of this information and a comparison of the revenue received from fixed rates (base charges) vs usage rates. James responded that they'll be looking into more of that, and that it's one of the advantages of using the electronic versions, rather than paper copies.

An audience member asked about data from different communities, comparing the rates to census data. James explained that that sort of data is not available yet, but it may be something they can consider in the future.

James was thanked for his presentation.

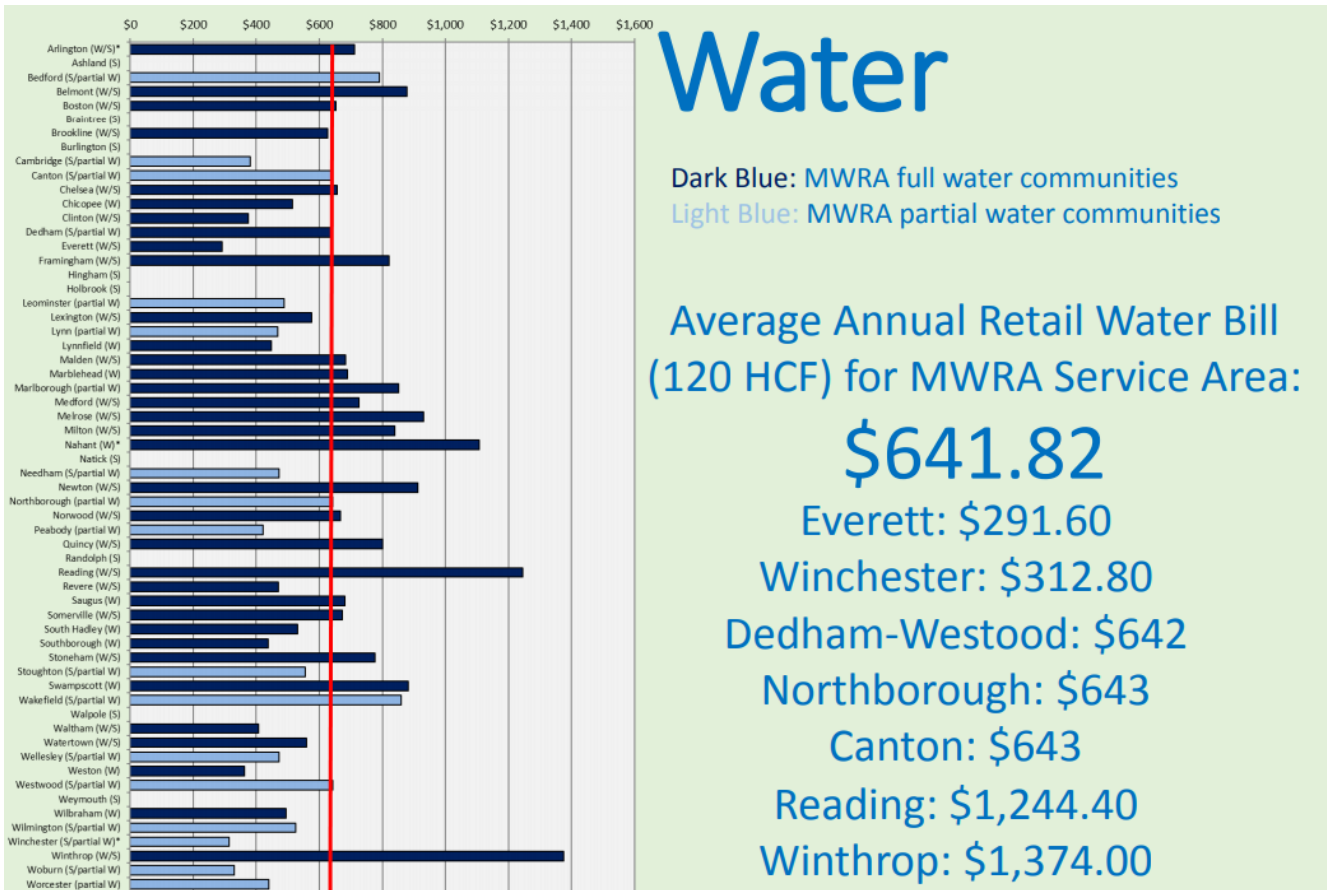
The Advisory Board completed administrative tasks and announcements, including the upcoming installation of new wastewater meters. Action items included the City of Cambridge requesting a

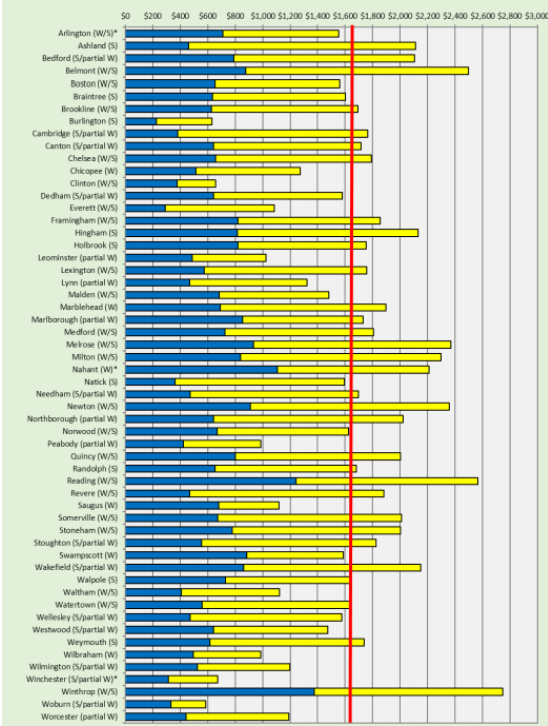
partial sewer separation for a trial period, and an emergency water supply agreement with the Town of Burlington, pending Burlington’s joining the MWRA. The motions passed. An update was also provided on the HEEC cable to Deer Island. An update on the figures for Department of Conservation and Recreation – Division of Water Supply Protection vacancies, which are still below the goal of 150 staff members, was provided. Additionally, plans for the MWRA redundancy tunnels are moving ahead.

MWRA Advisory Board business concluded. WSCAC members voted and approved the October 2019 meeting minutes.

The meeting was adjourned.

WSCAC will next meet on December 10, 2019, at 10:00 am at the John Carroll Water Treatment Plant in Marlborough. Please visit our website for more information on this meeting.





Combined

Average Retail Combined Bill (120 HCF) for MWRA Service Area:

\$1,659.64

3.54%

- Woburn: \$586.30
- Burlington: \$631.36
- Norwood: \$1,625.40
- Watertown: \$1633.20
- Walpole: \$1634.06
- Belmont: \$2,568.00
- Winthrop: \$2,748.00
- Revere: -2%
- Brookline: -2%
- Peabody: +25%
- Winthrop: +36%