

Water officials envision doubling of city of Flint water rates

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Flint, Michigan, water rates, which are already the highest in the nation, may go up twofold over the next five years, according to state water officials.

The Flint Water Interagency Coordinating Committee (FWICC), a body set up by Michigan Governor Rick Snyder last January, held a meeting in Flint on July 22. The question of the high water rates in Flint occupied most of the discussion inside the non-public event, which was streamed and uploaded to YouTube.

Several of the original appointees to the FWICC have since been replaced due to ongoing investigations, lawsuits and reshuffles resulting from the reckless and criminal decision to switch the city's water supply from the Detroit water system to the polluted Flint River that culminated in the lead poisoning of 100,00 Flint residents.

Even though Flint Mayor Karen Weaver announced a month ago that the city would uphold the financial commitment made to the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA), the city has held out the prospect of reducing water rates. The disastrous decision to switch Flint's water supply to the Flint River was made as part of a plan to utilize the KWA pipeline from Lake Huron, then under construction, as the city's new water source.

State Treasurer Nick Khouri, who heads the KWA subcommittee, presented a report that stated, "Without a change in basic operations or outside financial assistance, average bills could double within the next five years."

His report continued. "The relatively high bills are largely due to funding both wholesale water purchases and maintaining a water treatment plant. Additional contributing factors include transfers to the city's general fund, fixed system costs with a declining customer base, and the high proportion of non-revenue water."

"Non-revenue water" is a euphemism for water that leaks from the city's decaying infrastructure, either soaking into the ground or returning back into the sewage system. This is estimated to be some 40 percent of the city's total usage.

Today, nine months after the city was switched back to Detroit-supplied Lake Huron water, residents still cannot drink the water from their taps without filters, and are facing a cutoff of federal emergency funds on August 14. Despite that, officials from the same agencies that were responsible for the disaster exuded complacency in their discussion of their "progress" in ostensibly moving toward a permanent solution for Flint.

FWICC member Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, a pediatrician at the city's Hurley Children's Clinic, whose study on children's blood-lead levels helped to expose the water crisis, asked if it had been known that rates would continue to rise, despite residents having the highest water rates in the country. In response, Khouri glibly declared that the city was playing "catch-up" and that rates would go even higher.

In an e-mailed response to a press inquiry Dr. Hanna-Attisha said that since the water disaster in Flint was caused by decisions made by public officials, "People in Flint should never have to pay for water again, and they anticipate a doubling of water rates? It really should be free forever."

The city of Flint currently has a poverty rate of 41.6 percent, with a median household income of \$24,679 a year. With the average water and sewerage bill being \$140 each month, almost 7 percent of the average resident's income goes just to pay the water bill. The EPA estimates the threshold for water affordability at 2.0 percent to 2.5 percent of household income.

With perhaps more significance than she intended,

Flint's newly appointed utilities administrator, JoLisa McDay, spoke repeatedly to emphasize that the city did not have the resources to send crews out to repair broken or leaking water mains without pulling them off federally mandated Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) preparations to process water from the KWA pipeline.

Keith Creagh, who was just replaced as director of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) the week before by former BP Oil spokesperson Heidi Grether, insisted that Flint make a decision quickly on its water treatment options. The choice to be made in connection to the new KWA pipeline is whether to use the city's own outmoded water treatment plant, which would require significant upgrades, or to use the newer Genesee County water treatment facility, which in turn would require a significant expansion of the system to serve the entire Flint area.

Officials estimated that the time frame to begin pumping water to the city under either option is 24 to 30 months.

In response to a question from Dr. Lawrence Reynolds, a pediatric expert from Mott Children's Health Center, on how the outcome of the ongoing dispute over the legality of previous rate increases would affect future rates, Khouri expressed barely concealed arrogance. "Welcome to this world," he demurred, adding, "there are no easy answers." Khouri then pointed to the 40 percent loss of water from the distribution system, explaining that it wasn't known how much was leakage and how much was theft.

Reynolds described anecdotally how at his own hospital parking lot he has seen water bubbling up from the ground and for the last three years has been reporting it. Yet, nothing was ever done to fix the leak. He added pointedly, "It gets pretty fatiguing to hear that people must be stealing a significant portion of the 40 percent of the water."

This isn't the first time that the doubling of rates has been raised at a FWICC meeting. At a meeting held on May 13, Khouri raised the impending rates crisis. He offered explanations, but no solutions. However, a significant factor in the crisis is the fact that Flint's water infrastructure was built for 200,000 people in the 1960s and the distribution system is too large and costly for the current 100,000 residents.

Reynolds also cited the cost of maintaining the city's archaic water treatment plant, which had been largely mothballed and kept only as a backup for decades. "Certainly running your treatment plant and buying wholesale water is adding costs to the system," he said.

Another factor behind the high rates is the use of water revenue as the main funding source for the city. Khouri said last May, "There are higher transfers to the general fund from the water fund than other comparable systems that we looked at."

Representatives of the KWA and supporters such as Khouri still maintain that switching the water source from Detroit's (now the regionalized Great Lakes Water Authority's) treated Lake Huron water will save the city millions of dollars. Before the decision was authorized in 2013 by Khouri's predecessor, Andy Dillon, an engineering report contracted by Dillon himself advised against it for financial reasons.



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