



**Town Council Water & Sewer Forum  
February 9, 2011 7:00pm**

Under the Rules and Procedures of the Winthrop Town Council, President Turco called the meeting to order at 7:11PM in the Cummings School Multi-Purpose Room. Councilor Boncore, Councilor Powers, Councilor Varone, Councilor Maggio, Councilor Sanford, Councilor Calla were present. Councilor DelVento and Vice President Letterie were absent.

President Turco explained the format for this meeting and asked his colleague on the Winthrop School Committee, Todd Sacco to lead the Pledge of Allegiance. The President acknowledged Mr. Fred Lasky, Executive Director of the MWRA in attendance at the meeting.

**Public Comment**

Mr. David Osbourne asked if his time to talk could be extended beyond the usual five minute time period. With the amount of people present it was decided to hold all questions until after Councilor Powers made his presentation and Mr. Osbourne would be the last to address the Council with questions.

Mr. Guy Brandenstein addressed the Council with an idea of having the water & sewer rate voted on similar to the tax rate to allow for more transparency.

Chief Flanagan made a public thank you to Ms. Marie Turner, member of the Board of Directors at MWRA and Mr. Fred Lasky for their assistance in removal of snow to open up Shirley Street.

Councilor Powers proceeded to the podium to give a presentation on how Winthrop's Water & Sewer bills are calculated and where the money goes. He felt this forum was necessary to address the public's many questions regarding water & sewer bills. If any member of the public had a question that could not be answered at the forum a form could be filled out and it would be answered and posted on the web.

The reason the last quarter water and sewer bill was higher stemmed from the fact that the cycle was ten days longer than the previous bill. Water use for the town also did increase during this billing cycle. Bills usually cover 90 days. The statement many residents have questions about was a 100 day cycle. The next statement that was sent out was seven days less. Usage is based on meter readings.

In response to the question, where did the rebate go? Two amounts, \$165,000 from the 2007 census adjustment and assessment decreased by \$136,677. These two amounts were applied over two fiscal years, FY10 and FY 11, to maintain the water sewer rate which remained at \$13.31 for the last two years. The census adjustment was a one time reduction and does not carry over.

MWRA assessment is based on a three year rolling average of system usage apportioned over all member communities. Winthrop's portion is on average .7% of overall. Winthrop bases the cost/gallon on a three year rolling average of usage. If the town uses less water the shortfall comes out of the general tax revenue at the end of the Fiscal Year and the rate/gallon will increase the next year. If the town uses more water the increased income is used for infrastructure and or rate stabilization.

Winthrop's water pipes are old and need to be replaced. Over time there is a build up of minerals which slow the flow of water through the pipes. This can be detrimental when there is a fire like the one down the point. Two pieces of pipe were present at the meeting with significant buildup to demonstrate the need for replacing pipes or as is sometimes done scraping and filling the pipe with a cement liner.

Rate stabilization funds are necessary as MWRA expects potential rate increases of 4.3%, 3.1% and 10.3 % in coming fiscal years. A breakdown of the percentages of where the money goes is on the chart included in the record.

If a resident compares bills using the same billing cycle as the previous year and thinks there is a discrepancy the DPW can test a residents meter. That involves having your meter taken out and a temporary one put in and the meter is sent out of town to be tested. Of the 15 meters that have been tested all were fine but one was defective reading lower than actual water used. Residents can also at Town Hall for a consumption report which gives a history of usage and other information.

At this time the President asked Mr. Lasky from the MWRA if he would like to speak. Mr. Lasky addressed the public, understanding the fact that water and sewer bills are now a big part of everyone's budget. Projects mandated by the EPA helped to drive up costs. The Deer Island sewage treatment plant and the cleanup of Boston Harbor was a \$7 billion dollar project. These projects were very successful and we are reaping the benefits. Money was spent wisely with no impropriety. We need improvement to our infrastructure. The town has taken advantage of low interest loans and grants. We are unique because Marie Turner, a member of the Board of Directors at the MWRA and Winthrop resident is a big advocate for the town. Winthrop is one of two communities receiving mitigation payments from the MWRA. A direct payment of \$728,000 along with ambulance service to the Town of Winthrop costing \$250,000. A new fire truck was also purchased for the town at a cost of 750,000. Mitigation payments began in 1988 and since then they total more than \$48 million dollars. The MWRA Mr. Lasky pointed out is a good neighbor to Winthrop assisting in snow removal and use of equipment.

Nonni Hayes read a prepared statement from Marie Turner who was unable to attend the meeting due to illness. The letter was submitted and made a part of the official record.

### **Public Comment**

Mr. Todd Sacco asked Mr. Lasky if instead of collecting the mitigation money could we instead use the money to lower the town's water and sewer bills.

Mr. David Osbourne's commented that the surplus should be returned to the tax payers. He also spoke about change orders that range from 18-20%.

Mr. Lasky addressed Mr. Osbourne's concerns by informing him of the fact that there are full time auditors who monitor change work orders and that the surplus is used to smooth the rate which saves money in the long run.

A resident from Johnson Ave commented that the room would not be full of residents if the water bill in question was just 10% above the norm and wanted to know why there was such a spike this past summer. Councilor Powers informed him that not every household had a bill over 10% and every discrepancy would have to be looked at on a case by case basis. DPW Director, Dave Hickey said water bills are based on each individual water meter. 95% of the meters are accurate and as they age they don't speed up they tend to slow down.

Nonni Hayes wanted to have a discussion about the pros and cons of outside water meters. President Turco is an advocate of outdoor water meters which would charge the customer for the true cost of sewer but could increase the water rates. It has been brought up for discussion between the President, Town Manager, DPW Director and Director of Finance and is a policy decision that needs to be made. Some of the cons of outdoor meters would be the fact a large customer, the golf course, would not have to pay sewer charges and it would be a hit to the overall pool. Another disadvantage of outdoor water meters is our location near the ocean and a large amount of area below sea level. During flood events the sewer may be higher than water due to sump pumps working and ground water. Outdoor water meters also goes against conserving water.

Mr. Skip Marcella asked why for the same period last year his water consumption was up 300 cubic feet. The response to this question was that he could have had more company in his house during that time. A heavy user of water per person is 1000 cubic feet. Mr. Marcella also wanted to know why the MWRA pays for the ambulance service when they also bill the patient. It was explained that the ambulance company does not have enough business in Winthrop and the ambulance service needs to be subsidized. Our mitigation agreement will be up again in 2015. The Town Manager is looking at ways to save money with radio read meter systems to more accurately track water usage and electronic billing.

Mr. Todd Sacco wanted to know if the change work orders were 18% and how bills were handled for town enterprise funds. Does the town pay for water sewer bills for the Harbormaster and the Landing? Mr. Lasky said that change orders do not average 18%

not sure of exact figure will get back to the Council with that. All municipal buildings water bills add up to \$130,000. If not paid for by the rate payer would have to be added to the budget for the town and passed on to the tax payer.

Mr. Guy Brandenstein's question was regarding programs to improve infrastructure and how much pipe has been replaced in the town.

Dave Hickey responded that 50% of pipe has been replaced. The Putnam Street project was the first to use the program using 0% interest. Meter replacement program borrow half at 0% and find funding for the other half which would affect the rate. He spoke about why meter replacement is necessary and how we would benefit from more sophisticated meters.

Dottie DiFiorno asked if we could use a watchdog committee to watch over these projects and the census adjustments.

Mr. Al Peabody asked for clarification on the outdoor water meters. The town still needs to pay \$7 million. Even though residents will be charged actual sewer charges it will be the same amount of money owed just a reallocation of the charges.

Mr. Skip Marcella brought attention to the condition of the pipes used as an example at the meeting and his concern over the quality of drinking water. Councilor Boncore commented on how the DPW flushes the hydrants 4 times gets rust and rocks out. Water quality tests are done monthly. Winthrop's water is good, we have never had a quality violation.

Todd Sacco mentioned a three day period of time that he was without water and never received a letter of apology he also wanted to know what communities use Deer Island? All sewage that the MWRA services in the metropolitan area. Mr. Lasky acknowledged the inconvenience and spoke of ways the MWRA apologized.

Lee Dejelonis asked if a specific leak had been repaired and asked if Winthrop could get a reduced rate on sewer bills because of the impact of Deer Island in our community. It was pointed out that Deer Island is actually in Boston. Mr. Lasky said the decision was made a long time ago to make payments to the town. Keep in mind that Boston pays 1/3 whole thing.

Barbara Flavin Precint 1 asked, where does the bill go for the landing? There is no charge the water sewer rate payer pays for the Landing.

President Turco thanked Councilor Powers for his time spent on the forum. Also, Mr. Lasky for his attendance and expertise and the DPW for working round the clock to end the parking ban. The fire Dept was thanked for their hard work saving a house on Hillside Ave that was struck by lightning. The parking ban helped to save the property if there had been cars parked on the street it would have made access by the fire department very difficult. Chief Flanagan gave an update on Firefighter Lopez who had to be hospitalized overnight as a result of the fire.

At this time Mr. David Osbourne spoke about amounts of indirect charges that are part of the water/sewer bills. He wants the Council to pursue a rate payer assistant fund. He offered his ideas for lowering the rates. Return the surplus to the rate payer, have a separate commercial and residential rate Discount programs should be offered to the elderly and low income. He complimented the MWRA on being well run, a good producer of safe drinking water with a great website.

President Turco wished Speaker DeLeo a speedy recovery from a recent fall and asked for a motion to adjourn.

Motion was made by Councilor Varone

2<sup>nd</sup> by Sanford to adjourn at 9:15 pm

Also included in the minutes of Wednesday, February 9, 2011 Water and Sewer Forum

- Presentation by Councilor Powers
- Letter from Ms. Marie Turner

Respectfully submitted,

Leighanne Strangie  
Council Clerk