



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Equity, Gender, Seniors, Families and Vulnerable Populations Committee

Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, May 15, 2024

6:30 PM

Committee of the Whole

The meeting took in person and place virtually via Zoom and was called to order at 6:30 PM by Chair Strezo and adjourned at 7:42 PM on a roll call vote of 8 in favor (Councilors McLaughlin, Davis, Wilson, Scott, Burnley, Clingan, Pineda Neufeld and Strezo), none against and 3 absent (Councilor Sait, Mbah and Ewen-Campen). Councilors Davis and Burnley participated remotely.

Others present:

Director Dimitri Vidalis – Water and Sewer, Hannah Carrillo – Legislative Liaison, Peter Forcellese – Legislative Clerk.

Roll Call

Present:	City Councilor At Large Kristen Strezo, Ward Seven City Councilor Judy Pineda Neufeld, Ward Four City Councilor Jesse Clingan, Matthew McLaughlin, Lance L. Davis, Jake Wilson, Jefferson Thomas (J.T.) Scott and Willie Burnley Jr.
Absent:	Ben Ewen-Campen, Wilfred N. Mbah and Naima Sait

Public Hearing

1. Order
(ID # [24-0477](#))

By Councilor Strezo

That the Committee on Equity, Gender, Seniors, Families and Vulnerable Populations conduct a Committee of the Whole Public Hearing to hear how the increases in water and sewer rates are affecting Somerville residents, and be it further Ordered that all relevant city departments be in attendance.

Director Vidalis gave a brief statement and thanked everyone for attending this evening. He told the audience that the Water and Sewer Department is aware of residents' complaints and is making improvements to its communications process to make it informative, transparent and accessible to all residents, including translating any materials upon request. The department is committed to providing timely updates to the public and City Council as it works through resolving this situation. Director Vidalis invited those present to visit the table outside this chamber to obtain additional information or to discuss a water/sewer bill. He also noted that there will be a Public Hearing on May 29, 2024 at 6:00 PM regarding the setting of the new water and sewer rates. That meeting will be held in the Water and Sewer Department's conference room at 15 Franney Road.

Chair Strezo opened the Public Hearing at 6:35 PM

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Several residents spoke on the item and expressed their concerns, as follows:

- Can't afford to pay the bills,
- Went to the Water and Sewer Department about this 3 times and has yet to receive a response,
- No notice was provided about what would happen as a result of changing meters,
- Water Department knew about meter problems for about 2 years and did not fix it,
- It's unfair for residents to pay for the city's mistakes,
- Bill is due in 2 days, will interest be charged, will new bills be sent out,
- Contacted mayor and received no response,
- Filed an appeal of the bill and was denied,
- Bills sent in the wrong name and to the wrong address for 4 years even after notifying the Treasury Department,
- Bills have been high for 2 years,
- If someone wants their meter checked, they have to pay the fee if there is nothing wrong with the meter,
- Received a bill for \$24,000 (for 11 affordable units) and he wants to know what the next steps are
- Has not had an actual reading for 2 years,
- Bill went from \$600 every 3 months to \$1,300 even though there was only 1 estimated bill in a 5 year period,
- One former City Councilor told her to sell her house because there's nothing for her in this city and nobody who runs for office cares about her,
- Where's the mayor tonight,
- Received a \$5,000 bill - it used to be \$800 per period,
- Meter indicating that water is leaking at a rate of 10 gallons per hour, although no leaks are visible,
- Called 311 from the Winter Hill area and the call went to the City of Boston,
- Being billed for past usage at higher fiscal year 2024 rates and placed into a higher use tier,
- Received a \$41,000 bill for a 1 bedroom condo and there are no apparent leaks,
- No inspection was performed when the new meter was installed,
- Multiple errors on bills,
- Interest is accumulating while people wait for a resolution,
- Had to hire an attorney to resolve the matter because Water and Sewer staff will not provide information.

The public Hearing was closed at 7:06 PM and the record will remain open until noon on Friday, May 17th. Written comment may be sent to cityclerk@somervillema.gov <<mailto:cityclerk@somervillema.gov>>.

Councilor McLaughlin commented that he's disappointed more people aren't here. He mentioned that the city received \$79 million in ARPA funds and is spending it on a wide variety of things rather than on the city's infrastructure, which he believes was how the funds were intended to be spent. He believes that there are other ways to pay for upgrading the water and sewer system than having ratepayers bear the cost, and he would like to see a portion of the ARPA funds used for that purpose. Councilor McLaughlin noted that the Mayor is the only person who can decide how the ARPA funds are spent and he suggested that residents contact her office to ask that some of the ARPA funds be applied to alleviate the burden that they're facing.

Councilor Clingan noted that he spoke about this problem early on and he hopes that the administration is listening and has the creativity and talent to address the problem, as it's now evolving into chaos. He said that the Water and Sewer Department will adjust the bills for past usage to the 2022 and 2023 rates if they are brought into the department. He noted that there are still some unresolved issues, but he assured everyone that their City Councilors are listening.

Councilor Scott expressed his frustration with the situation. He's seen ARPA funds deposited towards multiple programs, studies, etc., and noted that this is the fourth year of having no plan and double digit increase in water/sewer rates, adding that he voted against the rates for several years. He told those listening that he can't get his own bill addressed. Councilor Scott pointed out that other cities have had similar problems and fixed them, some by setting up payment plans for ratepayers. He also noted that it is costing the city times as much to maintain the water and sewer system because the work is being outsourced, rather than being performed in-house.

Councilor Wilson agreed with using ARPA funds to lessen the burden on ratepayers. He commented that some ratepayers experienced anxiety due to the way the bills were written and he suggested that they be laid out so that people understand what they say. He also encouraged people to take the Water and Sewer Departments up on their offer to determine when the usage being billed for occurred so that bills might be adjusted to reflect the proper rates at those times.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld commented about the lack of empathy and courtesy displayed to those who contacted the Water and Sewer Department to discuss the bills they received. She spoke about the ARPA funds received by the city and said that \$62 million has already been spent and another \$15 million has been committed but not spent. There are no uncommitted funds available. She's curious if there's any wiggle room with the committed funds such that some of the money may be able to help those in need with paying their water and sewer bills.

Councilor Davis asked, rhetorically, “who else is embarrassed to be part of this government?”. He noted that discussions about the inconsistencies of the rates have been discussed at least since he took office in 2016. He went on to say that the situation is ridiculous and that empty promises have been made and that there is no excuse for the nonsense we’ve been hearing about for the past several weeks. He concluded his comments by stating “Figure it out and fix it”.

Councilor Strezo commented that she feels helpless to assist constituents with this situation and said that she can’t support rate increases. She’s concerned that the cost for water and sewer will be added to leases by landlords and cause displacement. She stated that the city saw this problem coming and did nothing to address it. Councilor Strezo put forth a motion *that the Administration address, in committee, its plan to prevent displacement in relation to water and sewer bills and any anticipated water and sewer bill increases, should they occur.* The motion was approved on a roll call vote of 8 in favor (Councilors McLaughlin, Davis, Wilson, Scott, Burnley, Clingan, Pineda Neufeld and Strezo), none against and 3 absent (Councilor Sait, Mbah and Ewen-Campen).

Councilor Pineda Neufeld put forth a motion *that the Administration report to this City Council the plans for the committed and unspent ARPA dollars and how much, if any, can be spent on current and future water and sewer bill relief for residents.*

Councilor McLaughlin said that any funding put towards infrastructure will help to relieve the burden on ratepayers in the future. Councilor Wilson spoke about the cost of infrastructure work and said that a formula is used to determine how the work is paid for using grants, bonds, ARPA funds and ratepayers. He suggested having conversations to rethink the formula in order to lessen the burden on ratepayers.

The motion was approved on a roll call vote of 8 in favor (Councilors McLaughlin, Davis, Wilson, Scott, Burnley, Clingan, Pineda Neufeld and Strezo), none against and 3 absent (Councilor Sait, Mbah and Ewen-Campen).

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Referenced Documents:

- Equity 2024-05-15 Public Comment (with 24-0477)