

1 PHILADELPHIA WATER, SEWER AND STORM WATER RATE
2 BOARD PUBLIC HEARING

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6 IN RE: Notation No. PA HRG

7

8 DATE: Tuesday, April 22, 2025

9 LOCATION: In-Person Meeting

10 One Parkway

11 18th Floor

12 Gas Commission Hearing Room (18031)

13 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19102

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15 Reported by: Ayanna Bethea Thorpe

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Job No.:

52966

1 ATTENDANCE

2 SONNY POPOWSKY, BOARD CHAIR

3 DEBRA MCCARTY, BOARD MEMBER

4 DANIEL CANTU-HERTZLER, BOARD MEMBER

5 RYAN MCSHERRY, BOARD MEMBER

6 DELAND BRYANT, BOARD MEMBER

7 MARLANE CHESTNUT, HEARING OFFICER

8 NEAL SELLERS, COUNSEL FOR WATER DEPARTMENT

9 ANDRE DASENT, PHILADELPHIA WATER DEPARTMENT

10 GLEN ABRAMS, PHILADELPHIA WATER DEPARTMENT

11 BROOKE DARLINGTON, WATER REVENUE BUREAU

12 ROBERT BALLENGER, PUBLIC ADVOCATE

13 VIKRAM PATEL, PUBLIC ADVOCATE

14 LANCE HAVER, PUBLIC OBSERVER

15 JONATHAN SZCZESNIAK, PUBLIC OBSERVER

16 MICHAEL SKIENDZIELEWSKI, PUBLIC OBSERVER

17 ALSO PRESENT:

18 ED MARKUS, BOARD CONSULTANT

19 CARL SHULTZ, PHILADELPHIA WATER DEPARTMENT

20 RENALDO HICKS, PHILADELPHIA WATER DEPARTMENT

21 ALEXANDRA ATHANASIADIS, WATER DEPARTMENT

22 ADRIANA GONZALEZ, WATER REVENUE BUREAU

23 KEITSHAWNA WILLIAMS, WATER REVENUE BUREAU

24

1 ATTENDANCE, cont'd

2 CHARLOTTE EDELSTEIN, PUBLIC ADVOCATE

3 TRAVIS GERY, PECO ENERGY CO.

4 ADEOLU BAKARE, PHILADELPHIA LARGE USERS GROUP

5 MATTHEW GARBER, PHILADELPHIA LARGE USERS GROUP

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2 PROCEEDINGS

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4 CHAIR POPOWSKY: Good afternoon,
5 everyone. I'd like to call this public
6 meeting, public hearing of the Philadelphia
7 Water, Sewer and Storm Water Rate Board. To
8 begin, I want to thank you for taking the
9 time to attend this hearing which is being
10 held to address the Philadelphia Water
11 Department's request to increase its rates
12 for service.

13 My name is Sonny Popowsky. I am
14 the chairman of the Philadelphia Water, Sewer
15 and Storm Water Rate Board. With me today is
16 my fellow Rate Board member, Deb McCarty.

17 We are part of a five member
18 independent volunteer board who are appointed
19 by the Mayor and confirmed by City Council to
20 set the rates charged by the Philadelphia
21 Water Department for water, sewer and storm
22 water service in the City of Philadelphia.

23 On March 31st, 2025, the Water
24 Department filed its formal notice of a

1 request to raise its rates beginning
2 September 1, 2025, and again on September 1,
3 2026. The amount of the increases requested
4 by the Water Department for individual
5 customers would vary based on your water
6 usage.

7 But for a typical water -- for a
8 typical residential customer, the Water
9 Department has stated that it is seeking to
10 increase the total monthly bill by about 11.7
11 percent in September, 2025 and by an
12 additional 5.9 percent in September, 2026.

13 The formal participants to this
14 proceeding, those who have registered to
15 participate in the technical hearings are the
16 Water Department, the Public Advocate who has
17 been appointed by the board to represent the
18 interests of residential and small commercial
19 customers, the Philadelphia Large Users Group
20 which is a group of large water customers,
21 the City's Revenue Bureau which is a part of
22 the City's Department of Revenue that
23 provides billing and collection functions for
24 the Water Department and administers the

1 department's customer assistance programs,
2 and two individual customers, Mr. Lance Haver
3 and Mr. Michael Skiendzielewski.

4 We've had a pre-hearing conference
5 under the direction of the hearing officer,
6 Ms. Marlane Chestnut, to address procedural
7 issues and to adopt a schedule.

8 Next month, the hearing officer
9 will hold technical hearings to examine the
10 statements and exhibits submitted by the
11 formal participants which will be considered
12 and used by the hearing officer and then by
13 the Rate Board to develop the final rate
14 determination in this proceeding.

15 But the purpose of today's hearing
16 is to hear from the customers of the
17 Philadelphia Water Department with respect to
18 concerns that you may have regarding these
19 proposed rate increases. There's a sign up
20 sheet as you enter the door of the hearing
21 room if you wish to testify or if you wish to
22 give a statement today.

23 And if you've not already done so -
24 - (sneezes) excuse me. If you've not already

1 done so, I would ask you to go to the sign up
2 sheet and print your name on the sheet. I
3 will call on people in the order in which
4 you've signed up. But even if you don't sign
5 up, I will try to allow everyone who wishes
6 to speak by the end of the hearing to do so.

7 In addition, if there are folks
8 here who would rather make your comments in
9 writing, you can send a letter or email to
10 the Rate Board anytime between today and the
11 close of the record on May 28th. The Rate
12 Board's email address is waterrateboard --
13 all one word -- @phila.gov.

14 Finally, if you have an individual
15 problem or question regarding your bills or
16 your water service that you would rather not
17 discuss publicly, there are representatives
18 of the Water Department here today who may be
19 able to discuss those issues with you
20 individually.

21 When it's your turn, I will call
22 your name. I will ask you to state and spell
23 your name. I will also ask you to state your
24 address, whether you are a customer of the

1 Water Department and whether you are speaking
2 on your own behalf or on behalf of a group.
3 After you make your statement, you may be
4 asked a clarifying question by one or more of
5 the formal participants.

6 But those questions are not to
7 trick or challenge you, but rather to make
8 sure that your position is clear for the
9 record. There's a court reporter here today
10 who will produce a transcript of this public
11 hearing, so please speak slowly and clearly.

12 I will not set a strict time limit
13 on your statements, but I would ask that you
14 try to limit your remarks to no more than
15 five minutes. After you're done, you are
16 welcome to stay, but you certainly don't have
17 to. You're free to leave at any time.

18 Now, before hearing from members of
19 the public, I would ask the Water Department,
20 the Public Advocate, and any other formal
21 participants who wish to do so to introduce
22 yourselves and make very brief comments
23 regarding your role in the proceeding.

24 After that, I will ask if there are

1 any public officials here who wish to make
2 any comments, and then I will open the
3 proceeding to members of the public. So
4 first, we will hear briefly from the Water
5 Department.

6 MR. SELLERS: Good afternoon. I'm
7 Neal Sellers, counsel for the Philadelphia
8 Water Department. And seated with me are
9 Andre Dasent, and, behind me, Brooke
10 Darlington from WRB. We also have staff from
11 PWD and from WRB on hand to handle or help
12 with any customer matters.

13 Speaking today for the Water
14 Department is Deputy Commissioner Glen Abrams
15 and he will give an opening statement.

16 MR. ABRAMS: Thank you. Good
17 afternoon, everyone. My name is Glen Abrams
18 and I serve as Deputy Commissioner of
19 Communications and Engagement at the
20 Philadelphia Water Department. Today, I'm
21 speaking on behalf of the Department in this
22 proceeding.

23 We first want to thank you all for
24 joining the hearing to share your views about

1 the rate increase request that the Water
2 Department has filed with the Philadelphia
3 Water, Sewer and Storm Water Rate Board.

4 The Water Department provides
5 drinking water, sanitary sewer, and storm
6 water services to residential, commercial and
7 institutional customers within the City.
8 These services are essential and the
9 foundation of public health in Philadelphia.

10 As you know, we recently requested
11 an adjustment in rates and charges so that we
12 have sufficient resources to continue current
13 and planned programs and to pay for
14 significantly increasing operating costs in
15 fiscal years 2026 and 2027.

16 Additional revenues are needed to
17 ensure that clean water is delivered as
18 safely and reliably as possible and that
19 wastewater treatment and storm water
20 management services meet your needs and the
21 needs of our shared environment while also
22 meeting our regulatory requirements.

23 The Water Department recognizes
24 that any increase in rates can be a hardship,

1 especially right now, but this increase is
2 necessary to maintain essential services and
3 address the Department's current and planned
4 projects. The Water Department is not a for
5 profit corporation, and your monthly water
6 bill supports the work that we do, not the
7 City budget or taxes.

8 We are engineers, laborers,
9 scientists, customer service representatives,
10 and, most importantly, neighbors and fellow
11 consumers of the water that every
12 Philadelphian depends on.

13 When we request higher rates, we
14 only request what we project will be needed
15 in the coming years, and we show our
16 customers why we are requesting these amounts
17 through this public rate setting process.
18 You can find a slide presentation on the Rate
19 Board website that helps explain why a rate
20 increase is necessary at this time.

21 Finally, we want you to know that
22 Philadelphia has robust and comprehensive
23 customer assistance programs which help low
24 income customers pay their bills including

1 the Tiered Assistance Program or TAP, the
2 Senior Citizen Discount, and other programs
3 that are more flexible than ever.

4 If you are experiencing hardship,
5 we want to help. You can use one application
6 for TAP, the Senior Discount, or other
7 programs available to assist households.
8 These programs are accessible through our
9 website at www.phila.gov/water-bill-help, or
10 by calling 215-685-6300, Monday through
11 Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

12 I would also note that if you have
13 specific billing questions or service issues
14 that you would like assistance with, that we
15 have PWD and WRB representatives to help with
16 you, and I'm just going to turn around and
17 ask if they can raise their hands. Thank
18 you.

19 And so, as we heard, the purpose of
20 today's session is to hear from you our
21 customers. We appreciate you taking the time
22 to share your views with us today, and we
23 look forward to hearing from you. Thank you.

24 CHAIR POPOWSKY: Thank you. Mr.

1 Ballenger?

2 MR. BALLENGER: Thank you. Good
3 afternoon. My name is Robert Ballenger. I'm
4 an attorney at Community Legal Services. My
5 colleague, Vik Patel, is here with me today.
6 CLS has been appointed to serve as Public
7 Advocate in this rate proceeding.

8 The Public Advocate's job is to
9 independently represent the interests of
10 residential and small commercial customers in
11 receiving water services at just and
12 reasonable rates.

13 I won't speak too much, just to say
14 that we really do encourage members of the
15 public to come forward, share your concerns
16 about the potential rate increases by
17 speaking here today or by providing input
18 separately to the board in writing.

19 If anyone would like more
20 information about the proposed rate increase,
21 would like to learn more about our work as
22 Public Advocate, or would like assistance
23 providing any information to the board, we
24 are available to assist and you can contact

1 us directly. Our phone number is 215-227-
2 9988. And we can be reached by email at
3 publicadvocate -- all one word -- @C-L-S-P-H-
4 I-L-A.org. Thank you.

5 CHAIR POPOWSKY: Thank you. I see
6 Mr. Haver is here. Are there any other
7 participants who want to just make an opening
8 statement? In that case now, please go
9 ahead, Mr. Haver.

10 MR. HAVER: Hi. Good afternoon.
11 My name is Lance Haver, a participant, which
12 means I get all the rate filings, I have the
13 right to do discovery, and I have the right
14 to talk to you. So, again, thank you very
15 much for showing up. And it's my sad burden
16 to tell you that these hearings are a farce.

17 The last six rate increases have
18 all been decided by the Public Advocate and
19 the Water Department's lawyers meeting, they
20 say, privately, I say, secretly behind closed
21 doors, and agreeing to rate increases year
22 after year after year after year after year.

23 Please don't be fooled by the words
24 of the Water Department or the Public

1 Advocate. The Public Advocate doesn't
2 represent you. He does not have a client
3 relationship with the public. The Water Rate
4 Board, Mr. Popowsky is the chair of it, hires
5 it, and it answers to -- the Public Advocate
6 only answers to Mr. Popowsky and his fellow
7 commissioners, not to any of us.

8 The advocate has agreed to every
9 single rate increase in the past six years.
10 The Water Department is hiding the size of
11 this rate increase. It says they're asking
12 for a rate increase, but it's not telling us
13 it's also asking in a different proceeding
14 for a rate adjustment.

15 The rate adjustment, we pay. The
16 rate increase, we pay. We pay both, but they
17 won't tell you that. If you ask them
18 directly, they won't deny it but they won't
19 tell you. Here's the game that goes on. The
20 Water Department isn't dumb. They're not
21 stupid. They always ask for more than what
22 they want.

23 Then they get to hire lawyers, they
24 got consultants who at least seven of them

1 are paid hundreds of thousands of dollars,
2 and the hearing examiner, and even the public
3 advocates have the public trough (phonetic)
4 with a paycheck.

5 They hold show hearings like this.
6 Then in secret, they call it private. The
7 Water Department, the Rate Board's lawyers,
8 get together without any of us in the room
9 and set it. The Water Department gets the
10 rate increase they really wanted all along.

11 Ratepayers are given the bill for
12 the well paid lawyers, up to \$700 an hour
13 according to Mr. Dasent's file, consultants,
14 hundreds of thousands of dollars each, and
15 the hearing examiner, and, of course, the
16 public advocates at the trough as well. It's
17 been happening for six years and it will
18 happen again this year unless the City
19 Council intervenes.

20 It's easy to see how far our
21 concerns are not considered. Every one of us
22 wants the Water Department to run
23 efficiently, to improve its operations, to
24 save money where it can. Yet of the seven

1 consultants that the Water Department hires
2 and the consultants that the Public Advocate
3 hires, none of them are tasked with finding
4 ways to lower cost or improve operations.

5 They're all tasked with looking
6 only at numbers and not what they operate.
7 Here's a clear example. PGW, Philadelphia
8 Gas Works is also municipally owned. Most of
9 us live in row homes with meters 20 foot
10 apart, yet the Water Department and the Gas
11 Works have separate billing, separate
12 collections, separate metering.

13 If they combine them, that would
14 simply save us money. They will not even
15 look at that issue during these hearings.

16 If you're concerned about the rate
17 hike. If you'd like to see the Water
18 Department improve, if you'd like to see them
19 use their resources to hire locally to create
20 living wage jobs so not so many of us are
21 struggling economically, the only way to do
22 that is through our elected officials in City
23 Council.

24 Mr. Popowsky, the so called Public

1 Advocate, are going to turn their backs on
2 us. They're not going to listen. And, in
3 fact, during discovery I asked that specific
4 question, "How many local companies does the
5 Water Department contract with?" And the
6 answer was they don't know. It's too
7 complicated to find out.

8 Again, thank you for coming. I'm
9 sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but these
10 hearings are a farce every year, year after
11 year after year after year after year.
12 Despite what the public says, they raise
13 rates behind closed doors and then claim that
14 they've done us the service. Thank you.

15 By the way, I am filming. If
16 anyone would like to testify or chooses not
17 to be filmed, just let me know and I'll turn
18 the camera off.

19 CHAIR POPOWSKY: Thank you, Mr.
20 Haver. Are there any public officials here
21 who wish to speak? In that case, could
22 someone bring up the sign in sheet?

23 MS. MCCARTY: I'm not sure
24 everyone's signed. Did you ladies sign in

1 yet?

2 CHAIR POPOWSKY: Oh, I'm sorry.

3 MS. MCCARTY: Yeah. They haven't
4 signed in.

5 CHAIR POPOWSKY: Yeah.

6 MS. MCCARTY: These two ladies in
7 the front here.

8 MR. BALLENGER: They're both
9 attorneys from the City.

10 MS. MCCARTY: Oh, sorry.

11 MR. BALLENGER: They're both
12 attorneys for the city. There's nobody
13 signed up --

14 CHAIR POPOWSKY: Oh. Oh, we had
15 one sign up but then crossed your name out.
16 Would you like to speak?

17 MR. SZCZESNIAK: Aye.

18 CHAIR POPOWSKY: Could you --

19 MR. SZCZESNIAK: Yeah. Hello, my
20 name is Jonathan Szczesniak.

21 CHAIR POPOWSKY: Could you please
22 come up?

23 MR. SZCZESNIAK: Hello, my name is
24 Jonathan Szczesniak. I don't really wish to

1 speak. I thought it was a sign in for --

2 CHAIR POPOWSKY: Oh, I apologize.

3 Okay. Thank you. Well, hey, does anyone
4 else, any other members of the public wish to
5 speak at the hearing? We do have another
6 hearing of which I expect more folks at a
7 virtual hearing this evening, another virtual
8 hearing tomorrow afternoon, and an in-person
9 hearing at 3600 North Broad Street at the --

10 MS. MCCARTY: Zion Baptist Church.

11 CHAIR POPOWSKY: -- Zion Baptist
12 Church. So if you know folks who do wish to
13 speak and attend the hearing, please let them
14 know. Did you have any --

15 MS. MCCARTY: No.

16 CHAIR POPOWSKY: Okay. If there's
17 nothing further, we will resume the hearing
18 at 6 o'clock tonight via Zoom and hope folks
19 will be able to join us then. Thank you.

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1 CERTIFICATE OF DIGITAL REPORTER

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3 I, AYANNA BETHEA THORPE, a Digital Reporter
4 and Notary Public within and for the State of
5 Pennsylvania, do hereby certify:

6

7 That the foregoing proceeding hereinbefore
8 set forth was accurately captured with annotations
9 by me during the proceeding.

10

11 I further certify that I am not related to
12 any of the parties to this action by blood or
13 marriage, and that I am in no way interested in
14 the outcome of this matter.

15

16 IN WITNESS THEREOF, I have hereunto set my
17 hand this 22nd day of April, 2025.

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20



21

Ayanna Bethea Thorpe, Notary
Notary Commission RON/NJ 50119412
Commission Expires: January 2, 2030

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