

Improving Relations Between Communities and the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department: Promoting the ‘Boston Model’

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The City of Detroit and the suburban communities it serves have debated the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department’s (DWSD) water and sewer rates for more than 30 years. At the heart of this debate are four central issues.

First, Detroit wants to retain ownership of its system. Second, Detroit wants to retain majority control of the governing body over the system. Third, the suburban communities want a greater voice in the decision-making process, and fourth, the suburban communities want more transparency in DWSD’s operations.

In a speech given last year, Federal Judge John Feikens emphasized several important points. For example, he said our region faces a multi-billion dollar challenge to maintain and rehabilitate aging infrastructure.

Feikens, who has had judicial oversight of the DWSD for the past 30 years, said establishing and maintaining public trust is crucial to ensure that the public will continue to support sufficient funding for infrastructure maintenance and restoration. I concur. Both the DWSD and its suburban customers must work together to resolve these issues. That’s why I’m proposing a change for the DWSD to a form similar to that utilized by the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA), typically referred to as “the Boston model.”

When faced with similar challenges in 1984, the MWRA detailed how communities served by the system could be assured a voice in the operation of the system. A critical feature of the MWRA is its advisory board. A full-time staff of five is paid by the authority but reports directly to the member communities. Staff members are knowledgeable with the inner workings of the authority. Most notably, they are experts in the rate-setting process. The staff also is helpful in the rate-setting process because, once the rates are vetted by these experts; member communities more readily accept recommended rates.

That’s because the advisory staff works for the customers and has the interests of the customers uppermost on the priority scale. Also, because they are embedded in the operation, they get a first-hand look at the operations and quickly learn all aspects of the system. That, in itself, promotes greater transparency.

I am convinced that, through an advisory board, we can emulate this proven success. Under my proposal, this arrangement would be incorporated in the DWSD proposed 30-year model water contract.

By contract, the Detroit Water Board would recognize and commit to work with the community advisory board. The DWSD would provide funding for the advisory board's staff. Staffing costs would be charged back to the suburban customers through the rate-setting process. Further, the advisory board employees would report directly to the member communities on such things as rate-setting, capital improvement plans, and policies affecting the system.

This proposal does not require any legislative changes. It does not alter Detroit's ownership of the system. It does, however, change the current culture from one of mistrust and paranoia to one embracing a better working relationship based on just dealing and enforced by a fair and equitable contract.

I believe this would eliminate expensive and time-consuming litigation between DWSD and the suburban communities that has existed for the past 30 years. It also would improve relations in the region. The end result... all citizens in the region win.