



County of Bucks

CONSUMER PROTECTION / WEIGHTS & MEASURES

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MICHAEL D. BANNON
Director/Chief Sealer

September 18, 2017

Good morning Chairman Godshall and Chairman Caltagirone.

My name is Michael Bannon. I am the Director of the Bucks County

Consumer Protection/Weights and Measures Departments.

Thank you for allowing me to appear before the Consumer Affairs
Committee.

I am here today to express my support for House Bill #798 which proposes to
introduce legislation that would place municipal water and sewer authorities
under the jurisdiction of the Pennsylvania Utility Commission (PUC).

Our Consumer Protection/Weights & Measures staff serve over 627,000
residents in Bucks County. There are thirty five sewer authorities as well as
thirty four water system providers within the county.

Our role in the Consumer Protection Department is to mediate
issues/complaints between our residents and business. We receive complaints
on a regular basis regarding water and sewer authorities. The most prevalent
complaint however is concerning their billing practices. The problem most
often begins with residents expressing their inability to understand their bill
and how it is calculated when they read things such as “minimum usage fee”

and “multi-meter fee”. This has caused much frustration to our residents as the response to their questions via these authorities are rarely quite clear or concise.

Countless times the complaints we receive are because of “excessive water usage fees” imposed on bills. When residents call their local water & sewer authority to question the reason behind this fee, the response is consistently that they, the home owner, “must have a huge leak somewhere in their home”.

While a leak is certainly a real possibility, in our experience with these companies many times turns out to be a “calculation error” on the part of the authority which they will then correct.

Each “Authority” follow their own set of guidelines for their business practices. Other than utilizing the civil court process, there is no other system in place for a resident to dispute or challenge a discrepancy. These entities have very little accountability regarding transparency of process, billing or customer service for residents that, as a matter of necessity, are forced to pay for their service.

I have heard the opinion that municipal water and sewer authorities are regulated by the D.E.P, however, while the D.E.P. certainly maintains an environmental protection interest, it does not play a part in the consumer protection piece that Pennsylvania residents need.

At this time, I believe that our Pennsylvania residents would be best served by a form of protection concerning transparency and consistency across the board with “Water and Sewer Authorities” by way of these entities being required to report to the Pennsylvania Utility Commission.

Comments: Woody Hill, Sept. 25,2017 for HB 798

I am here to hopefully help resolve what is a serious legal and legislative problem. The problem is one of customer accountability and billing processes by municipal authorities. I will use my personal experience to help illustrate the necessity of having an independent monitoring of billing and service disputes by a third party and to have uniform and transparent billing practices by all of the water and sewer providers.

My complaint is with Bucks County Water and Sewer Authority who provides service to my building in Langhorne, PA. I have included some correspondence to help illustrate this problem of being powerless as a customer in dealing with my complaint of being overbilled for minimum charges. Exceeding the actual cost of the product itself. Water is a necessary commodity and granting the authorities an unregulated monopoly creates an unfair situation for the customer to try and resolve complaints and adjust their use to higher costs. I have included some letters documenting my complaint over a year period.

The first is a summary of my e-mail correspondence with the billing and customer service department(attached). It began on September 24, 2015, and ended on December 2, 2015. When I appealed my bill to Patrick Cleary, CIO, to help resolve and clarify his rates. Note, that I had been asking for a rate schedule since October and was told that none existed.

I was becoming very frustrated with Mr Cleary's lack of a response and took my complaint to Frank Farry, my local State Representative. I eventually got a response from Mr. Cleary on January 4, 2016 after e-mailing Frank Farry to help get a response. The response from Mr. Cleary was very unclear, it contained no verifiable numbers or any definitions. I called Mr. Cleary and he scheduled a phone meeting with him and a Mr. Butler to help resolve the complaint. Nothing was settled and I requested a summary of the meeting. After waiting until January 29, I sent another letter to Mr. Cleary, again with no response.(attached).

I decided to go before their Board on their next meeting on February 22, 2016 (attached). I was referred to Ben Jones to try and resolve my issues. Once again nothing but a confusing response was received with him requesting I read House Bill 51. At this point I was getting totally frustrated and went to Bucks County Consumer Protection for assistance. This was April 22, 2016, seven months after I first asked for a rate schedule. At first BCWSA used the same delay and deceive strategy, but the investigator was able to pursue it (attached) and I received a rate schedule called "Amended and Reinstated Consolidated Rate Schedule." This was sent to Consumer Protection, not to me. I read it and sent an e-mail to Steve Hann's office. This was the rate schedule in disguise and I asked him about the uniformity of the rates. I got no response.

In conclusion, you can see what difficulties the consumer has in disputing any bill irregularities. I believe all water and sewer charges should be billed on a per gallon rate, those phantom line charges fall on the poorest consumer the most. They have no control over their bills and reducing consumption does little to lower their costs. As stated before an independent regulator is necessary to protect and enforce uniformity in rates across the state.