



Queens Civic Congress

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QUEENS CIVIC CONGRESS TESTIFIES AGAINST WATER & SEWER RATE HIKE, May 2, 2006

Presented and Prepared by
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Executive Vice President for Public & Legislative Affairs

Thank you, on behalf of the Queens Civic Congress, for the opportunity to testify on our continuing concerns that water rates increase without any real oversight. I am Corey Bearak, Executive Vice President of this umbrella group that represents 100 civic, cooperative, condo, tenant and other community associations throughout the borough of Queens. Our membership represents almost every community in the borough. We oppose this near double digit 9.4% rate hike.

The Queens Civic Congress finds that these consistent annual increase in water – and sewer -- rates place a hardship on homeowners, many seniors living on fixed incomes, cooperatives and small businesses. The Water Board must adopt policies that keep the rates as low as possible, while delivering clean drinking water and providing for safe disposal of wastewater. While we commend the record on quality water delivery and efforts to upgrade wastewater disposal, the Water Board and our City fathers consistently get failing grades on rate-setting. The proposed rate increase looks particularly gouging with the enormous surplus the Water Board projects. The 9.4% rate increase follow a scheme of hikes throughout all but 2 times over nearly three decades. This occurs because current water system funding scheme fails to recognize the essential linkage between property taxes, which once subsidized much of the water and sewer system, and these water use taxes. The shift towards full funding of the water and sewer system through the water rates did not result in any corresponding property tax reduction. Rising property tax bills and water use taxes represent significant costs to property owners. Mayor Bloomberg's property tax rebate for homeowners reflects knowledge of the upset that New Yorkers express at these regressive taxes; both impact New Yorkers who can least afford any increases. City Hall continues to ask homeowners and renters to pay more for the same services whose rising prices have yet to be justified by the Water Board. View this proposed increase in context as one in a series of continuing increases; **since metering began in the 1980's, the cost of New Yorkers' water increased more than four-fold. (450%).**

The Water Board and the administration it serves seems to limit discussion to assumptions that dictate an outcome that results in annual rate hikes. In the context of those assumptions, the technicians get an "A" for work done well. The problem remains that dependence on these assumptions allow policy-makers to avoid the reviews that could reduce the systems costs and reduce our rates.

First, this water tax uniquely factors in the capital costs for building a new water supply and delivery and treatment facilities plus the transfer of pre-1982 infrastructure bond debt. Including these capital costs -- much greater than actual operating expenses -- in calculating the water rate perpetuates a regressive practice not used by any other portion of the city for funding capital items. Furthermore, many of these expenses -- 70% of the project capital costs over the next five years - result from Federal and some state mandates. As we stated in prior annual testimonies and in our platform, rather than make ratepayers carry this burden, the City and its water board ought to seek appropriate federal and state relief. It's only fair.

Second, the New York City capital budget should fund the capital costs for water supply and treatment facilities. In our platform, the Queens Civic Congress continues to question a filtration plant in a park when the time exists to pursue filtration avoidance measure in the Croton Watershed and advocate for the Federal reforms needed to empower New York City to implement these cost effective alternatives. New York City and its water board owe a duty to its taxpayers and citizens, not to upstate special interests for whom we effectively subsidize development, when we acquiesce in a building a filtration plant for the Croton system.

Third, the water board and the city must acknowledge Water and Sewer charges as a use tax dedicated to the maintenance and operation of treatment facilities and the city water supply. Use taxes traditionally regulated cost as well as promoted conservation. In New York City, it exemplifies back-door funding for capital work, set outside of the normal budgeting process.

This forms the basis of our fervent objection to the practice of setting rates before the City adopts its budget. Our platform, found on our website, www.queensciviccongress.org, specifically calls for this reform. The State Assembly passed A.03452/S.2883, introduced by Assembly Member Mark Weprin and proposed by former Borough President Fernando Ferrer, to address this inequity; it remains pending in the State Senate where Kevin Parker is the prime sponsor, and should be passed. The state bill addresses the failed local attempt to impose this reform: Int. No. 72-A, which I co-authored and negotiated, and the City Council passed in 1994 only to be vetoed by Mayor Giuliani. Int. No. 72-A resulted in the Water Board passing a resolution to delay its rate-setting effective in calendar 1999. In December 1997, the Water Board and the Giuliani administration broke the 1994 agreement and voted to rescind this resolution. We continue to support and advocate this important reform. It simply makes sense to empower the City Council to influence the rates set by the Water Board. It would create a greater incentive to economize and expand water conservation efforts. Also, it should encourage more New Yorkers to express their concerns about the City's water and sewer programs.

Better oversight might shed light on the water system's rental payments to the city, a clear subsidy by ratepayers to the general fund. Few know about the agreement which enables the city to pocket a projected \$143.5 million in rental payments in fiscal year 2006 (source Water Board's

Blue Book). That amount increased by nearly \$20 million – talk about back door taxes!

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Queens Civic Congress Budget testimony to the NYC Water Board May 2, 2006, page three of four

These funds come out of the charges we pay. And for about every \$15 million, the rates could be reduced about 1 percent. Eliminating the current rental payment erases any need for the increase. Last's payment would have funded not only the rescission of the rate hike but a decrease in excess of 6%. Add Croton and its related pork projects and save more.

Finally, the water board needs to get on board and support efforts to ease the impacts of rate increases on our seniors who lived on fixed incomes. The Queens Civic Congress supports A.5569 which would provide a tax levy subsidy to households 65 or older and with incomes below the current Senior Citizens Homeowner Exemption eligibility limit to help offset the increasing water rates. Modeled on SCRIE and SCHE, this program developed by Ferrer and Queens Assembly Member Ann Margaret Carrozza would help seniors keep housing costs in check, enable them to stay in their homes and continue to be an important neighborhood stabilizer. We urge the Water Board's support to help get the Senate as well as the Assembly to act in the current session.

In closing, we oppose any rate hike, support a rate rollback outlined above, and urge support for the legislative initiatives outlined above. Thank You.

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[A chart indicating rate increases since 1980 follows on the next page]

The entire Queens Civic Congress Platform may be viewed on the internet at:

<http://www.queensciviccongress.org/Platform/final2004Platform-forvote.pdf>

The next Queens Civic Congress meeting, takes place Sunday, May 7, our biannual civic convention and luncheon at Antun's.

Queens Civic Congress Members

Bayside Civic Database ♦ Bayside Hills Civic Association ♦ Bayswater Civic Association ♦ Bay Terrace Community Alliance, Inc. ♦ Bellaire-Bell Vill Civic Association ♦ Belle Harbor Property Owners Association ♦ Bellerose Commonwealth Civic Association ♦ Bellerose Hillside Civic Association ♦ Bell Park Manor Terrace Community Council ♦ Bowne Park Civic Association ♦ Briarwood Community Association ♦ Broadway-Flushing Homeowners ♦ Cambria Heights Civic Association ♦ Cherry Robinson Homeowners ♦ C.O.M.E.T. (Communities of Maspeth-Elmhurst Together) ♦ Concerned Citizens of Laurelton ♦ Creedmoor Civic Association ♦ Doug-Bay Manor Civic Association ♦ Douglas Manor Association ♦ Douglaston Civic Association ♦ Dutch Kills Civic Assn. of Long Island City ♦ East Flushing Civic Association ♦ Federated Block Associations of Laurelton ♦ Federation of Civic Associations of Southeast Queens ♦ Floral Park Community Council ♦ Flushing Heights Civic Association ♦ Flushing on the Hill Taxpayers Association ♦ Flushing Suburban Civic Association ♦ Forest Hills Chamber of Commerce ♦ Forest Hills Crescents Association ♦ Forest Hills-Van Court Association ♦ Fresh Meadows Homeowners Association ♦ Georgetown Mews ♦ Glen Oaks Village Owners, Inc. ♦ Greater Astoria Historical Society ♦ Greater Whitestone Taxpayers Civic Association ♦ Harding Heights Civic Association ♦ Hillcrest Estates Civic Association ♦ Hilltop Village Co-Op #1 ♦ Hilltop Village Co-Op #2 ♦ Hilltop Village Co-Op #3 ♦ Hilltop Village Co-Op #4 ♦ Hollis Hills Civic Association ♦ Holliswood Civic Association ♦ Hollis Park Gardens Civic Association ♦ Holly Civic Association ♦ Hunters Point Community Coalition ♦ Hyde Park Owners Corp. ♦ Jackson Heights Beautification Group ♦ Jamaica Estates Association ♦ Jamaica Hill Community Association ♦ Juniper Park Civic Association ♦ Kew Forest Neighborhood Association ♦ Kew Gardens Civic Association ♦ Kew Gardens Hills Homeowners Association ♦ Kissena Park Civic Association ♦ Little Neck Bay Civic Association ♦ Little Neck Pines ♦ Lost Community Civic Association ♦ Malba Civic Association ♦ Middle Village Property Owners Association ♦ Mitchell Linden Civic Association ♦ Neponsit Property Owners ♦ Newtown Civic Association ♦ North Bellerose Civic Association ♦ North Flushing Civic Association ♦ North Hills Estates Civic Association ♦ Northwest Clearview Homeowners Association ♦ Norwood Civic Association ♦ Oakland Gardens/Terrace Community Council ♦ Off Broadway Homeowners Association ♦ Old Forest Hills, Association of ♦ Our Neighborhood Improvement Association ♦ Ozone Tudor Civic Association ♦ Parkway Village Historical Society ♦ Queensboro Hill Neighborhood Association ♦ Queens Colony Civic Association ♦ Queens Community Civic Corp. ♦ Queens Village Civic Association ♦ Ramblersville-Hawtree Civic Association ♦ Richmond Hill Historical Society ♦ Ridgewood Property Owners Association ♦ Rockaway Action Committee ♦ Rocky Hill Civic Association ♦ Rosedale Civic Association ♦ Royal Ranch, Inc. ♦ Sagamore Douglaston Civic Association ♦ South East Queens Concerned Neighbors ♦ South Ozone Park Civic Association West ♦ Springfield/Rosedale Community

Appendix A

Water and Sewer Rate Increases

Date/FY	Meter change %	Sewer Charge %	Total Rate** Increase
1980		25%	
1981		33%	
1982		33%	
1983		50%	
1984		50%	
1985		60%	
1986		60%	
1987*	9.9%	60%	9.9
1988	12%	70%	19%
1989	0%	75%	14%
1990, 1-6	7.8%	88%	24.3
1990, 7-12	9.00%	112%	
1991	0%	112%	22.9
1992	6.4%	136%	18%
1993	0%	159%	10%
1994	0%	159%	0%
1995	0%	159%	0%
1996	5%	159%	5%
1997	6.5%	159%	7%
1998	6.5%	159%	7%
1999	4%	159%	4%
2000	4%	159%	4%
2001	1%	159%	1%
2002	4%	159%	4%
2003	6.5%	159%	6.5%
2004	5.5%	159%	5.5%
2005	5.5%	159%	5.5%
2006	3%	159%	3.0%