

Courier Times

NEWS

Proposed Bucks County sewer sale faces more opposition



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Bucks County Courier Times

Published 10:01 p.m. ET Aug. 27, 2022

While questions still abound about the proposed sale of the Bucks County Water and Sewer Authority's sewer system to Aqua Pennsylvania for \$1.1 billion, last week concern turned to continued speculation of the private company's interest in the water system.

The water system is not currently part of the proposed sale that has been met with stark opposition, including at the BCWSA's board meeting Wednesday, as ratepayers and municipal officials fear Aqua, a private utility, will raise rates as it for sewer services after purchasing other public systems.

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Bucks County, in its vetting of the proposal, has sent a list of questions about the sale to the authority and wants answers by Monday. Authority board members also want to know what Bucks County would do with the almost \$1 billion in proceeds it might reap if a sale did occur.

While the water system is not part of the deal, not all are convinced that will always be the case.

After Wednesday's meeting BCWSA Executive Director Ben Jones again said the authority has no intentions of selling its water system to Aqua Pennsylvania and Aqua's parent company, Essential Utilities. But Essential Chairman and CEO Christopher Franklin said he would like to buy the North Penn and North Wales Water Authorities that treat water for distribution to BCWSA water customers as well as their own customers.

"I would love to buy North Penn and North Wales and we could run it much better than they do," Franklin said.

He made the comment after being asked about a statement Tony Bellitto, executive director of the North Penn Water Authority, made earlier this month.

Bellitto said that if Aqua ever tried to purchase the BCWSA water system, which buys 8 million gallons a day of water treated at the North Penn and North Wales' Forest Park treatment plant in Chalfont, North Penn and North Wales would shut off the pump they own that draws water from the Delaware River into Bucks County's Lake Galena before being shipped to Forest Park for treatment.

Lake Galena holds 1.8 billion gallons of raw water, Jones said Wednesday night.

The BCWSA signed a lease agreement with Bucks County last year for \$24.8 million so that the BCWSA would have access to more water from the lake if it ever needed it in a drought emergency, though he didn't foresee anything happening here like is happening in the western states. Jones stressed Wednesday night that the BCWSA has no intentions of selling its water system to Aqua.

But Bellitto said Thursday that Franklin's comment showed that Aqua Pennsylvania does have its eye on the water systems in the region even as it is pursuing the BCWSA sewer service. The North Penn and North Wales Authorities currently take about 20 million gallons a day of water from the lake for their own use as well as the 8 million to treat and then sell to the BCWSA.

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"It will not happen. If he ever attempts to do something like this, he will be shut down immediately," Bellitto said. "For him to claim he can do a better job is nonsense. We do an excellent job and provide excellent quality service to our customers."

Robert Bender, executive director of the North Wales Water Authority, stated: "The North Wales Water Authority (NWWA) strongly opposes the privatization of publicly owned and operated water or sewer systems. This includes the proposed sale of the BCWSA sanitary sewer system."

At the BCWSA meeting, Board Chairman John Cordisco stressed that the board has not made up its mind about a sewer sale to Aqua, as he took heat from ratepayers who protested the board even considering the offer, saying that Aqua, as a private company, has to make a profit and provide for its stockholders and has raised customers' rates in multiple other municipalities in Pennsylvania where it now own the sewer or water service.

One woman who lives in a community already served by Aqua said her sewer rate went from \$78 in 2017 to \$137 a month now. "What do you think Aqua will do to these poor people," she asked, pointing to the audience.

Tom Tosti, a local director of the American Federation of State, Local and Municipal Employees, questioned how Jones could still be directing the BCWSA if he has been offered a job with Aqua, as was rumored.

Jones said Aqua offered to keep BCWSA employees and as one of them he could be considered, but he also could continue to run the water side of the BCWSA or retire. "I do not have a letter of intent with Aqua," he said.

Patty Knight of Holland in Northampton told the board that they faced "almost a moral dilemma for a very essential service...I hope the board is looking for what is the cost benefit over a long time."

As the BCWSA board received the proposed sale offer last November, several residents questioned why they had just heard about it in the past few months. One man said he just learned of it Wednesday and suggested the BCWSA put an announcement in with their bills and survey their customers on whether they should sell the sewer system.

Franklin and Marc Lucca, president of Aqua Pennsylvania, also listened intently to the audience's comments. Franklin said they appreciated the questions and concerns, but "what is most frustrating is the volume of misinformation. (It) is frightening," he said.

The board also held a meeting Tuesday with municipal officials. Several municipalities in Bucks have signed resolutions and formed a coalition to oppose the sale.

Bucks County COO Margie McKeivitt sat at the back of the room Wednesday, listening to the residents' comments. She said the county government was awaiting the answers to its questions to the BCWSA, expected Monday, before it would comment on the proposal.

