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Officials credit community outcry for blocking sale of Bucks County's sewer system

Posted Wednesday, September 7, 2022 3:17 pm

By **Freda R. Savana**

Updated at 11:50 a.m., Thursday, Sept. 8, 2022, to include a statement from Aqua Pennsylvania.

It was residents' widespread and fierce criticism of the proposed sale of Bucks County's sewer system to Aqua Pennsylvania that spurred local officials to stop the privatization, said several community leaders during a Doylestown rally Wednesday morning.

"We would have lost all control to hedge funds and corporations," Tom Tosti, director of AFSME Council 88, told the crowd of about 50 outside the former courthouse on East Court Street. "We would have lost jobs and rates would have gone up" should the sale have moved forward.

He credited people across Bucks County for organizing with NOPE (Neighbors Opposing Privatization Efforts) and lawmakers Tina Davis (D-141) and Steve Santarsiero (D-10) for supporting the campaign to end Aqua's drive to buy the system for \$1.1 billion. It would have been the largest privatization of a public utility in the country.

"We applaud the community for having the courage to come out against it," Davis said. "When you dangle that much money, it's tough," she added.

In a statement, Santarsiero, who also serves as chair of the Bucks County Democratic Committee, thanked Commissioners Harvie and Diane Ellis-Marseglia "for standing up for the public's interest in opposing the proposed sale ...they understand that public assets – such as the sewer system – are best held by a public utility."

Stacey Mulholland got a round of applause when, quoting Mark Twain, she said, "Whiskey's for drinking, water's for fighting." As Executive Director of the Bucks County Association of Township Officials, Mulholland's organization was among the first to come out against Aqua's offer and call on county commissioners to also object.

At the time, Mulholland, called the staggering offer "sort of a side issue, the real issue is the rate increases for payers. If Aqua is such a sweet deal, just look at other municipalities' (where Aqua owns utility services) rates."

On Wednesday, she again pointed to the sales' pitfalls. "We will lose reasonable rates, local control and quality." She, too, thanked the community. "You educated yourselves, and you cared."

Maggie Rash, president of the BCATO, echoed the appreciation and activism.

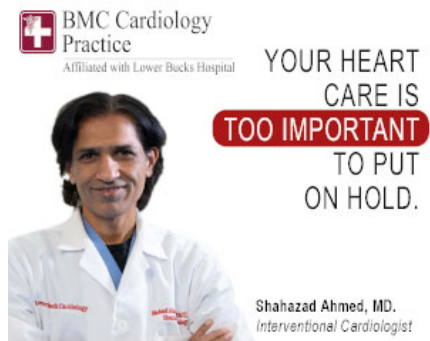


In an email late Wednesday, Aqua said, "While we were surprised and disappointed by the sudden turn of events yesterday, we respect the opinions of the Bucks County elected officials and have offered to remain a resource to them. The professionalism of the staff at BCWSA was exemplary and we hope to continue those collegial relationships as we work together to solve the water and sewer challenges in our region.

On Tuesday, Bucks County Commissioners each issued statements opposing the potential sale, while also acknowledging the work of the authority in evaluating the deal.

As all the speakers thanked the commissioners for rejecting the possible sale, the audience applauded its approval.

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Also uncertain is just how the Bucks County Water and Sewer Authority will untangle its negotiations with Aqua. Asked about it, Harvie said he's been assured "there are off ramps."

While the overwhelming support to deny the sale is apparent, Tosti said it's critical to remember the fight isn't finished.

"It's not over today," he said, "There's still one more vote. We have to hold their feet to the fire and save our sewer and water authority." The Bucks County Water and Sewer Authority is scheduled to hold its next regular meeting Sept. 13.

Harvie said he's "not concerned" about the outcome of the vote to end the proposed sale.

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Keywords

Bucks County Water and Sewer Authority, Aqua Pennsylvania



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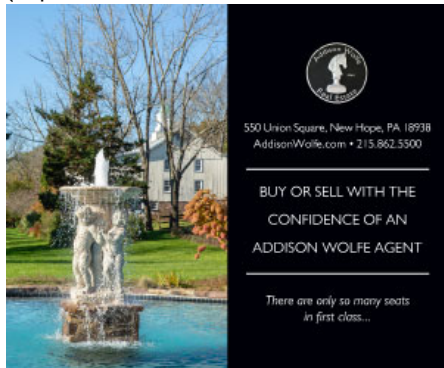
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