

Aqua bill

Written by Christina Dimeo, Correspondent

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“Aqua” bill unanimously passes Virginia House and Senate

The pair of bills that will impose stricter rules on water and sewer companies such as Aqua Virginia were passed unanimously by the Virginia House of Delegates (Feb. 8) on Monday and the Virginia Senate on Thursday (Feb. 11).

The bills, which are now identical to each other, put water and sewer companies on the same level as other utilities by making public the communications between those utilities and the State Corporation Commission (SCC), which regulates them.

The bills also require water and sewer companies to include notice of rate increases in the paper or electronic bills of customers, rather than simply publishing legal notices in a newspaper.

“It’s about notice,” said Del. Rob Bell, who sponsored the House bill. “The existing law did not cover water and sewer. The first thing the bill did was put water and sewer on the same page as the other utilities in terms of communication. Second, there was a clear thought that customers weren’t getting notice about rate changes. Customers weren’t asking for a whole separate mailing, but thought that the companies should be able to tell them in the bills they receive, so that they could take a role in the process.”

Lake resident Ida Swenson, who was influential in bringing the bills about, gave examples of why she thought the legislation was needed. “In 2012 we walked into a rate increase hearing to learn that the SCC staff and Aqua Virginia had already reached a deal to set the asked-for rate and not to cross-examine each other’s witnesses. The jury had decided before the trial,” she said.

Last August when Swenson learned that Aqua was requesting a rules change from the SCC, she went onto the SCC’s website to check it out. It was only then, she said, that she discovered Aqua had already asked the SCC for a rate increase.

“What this bill is going to do is ensure that when Aqua asks for another rate increase, we have to be notified in our bills,” Swenson said. “None of this finding out by accident. The other thing is

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it requires transparency between the SCC and the customers. If there are any communications between the SCC and the water company, they have to be made public.”

Bell commended Swenson on her efforts, saying that one of his colleagues cited her as an example of “how one person, if they work hard enough, can get the law changed.”

Shannon Becker, president of Aqua Virginia, said, “Aqua Virginia commends the House and Senate for reviewing customer notices, and we believe the requirements in the amended bills will help utilities better inform and communicate with their customers. Aqua is responsible for delivering quality drinking water and wastewater service and complying with rigorous health and environmental laws. We welcome more opportunities to share what we do and what it means for our customers.”

When asked if it was typical for bills to receive such resounding support, Bell said, “We worked hard in committee to address concerns. We came up with a bill that people were comfortable with, and once it passed committee it became essentially unanimous.”

Sen. Tom Garrett, who sponsored the Senate bill, called its passage a “victory for transparency.” He said that he took his bill in committee and conformed it to Bell’s House bill so that the two would be identical. The House and Senate still need to vote on each other’s bills, he said, but now that they have passed identical bills he doesn’t foresee any issues. In about three weeks one bill will be merged into the other and sent to Gov. Terry McAuliffe’s office, he said.

“I have briefly spoken with the governor’s people and I feel that [signing this bill] is a foregone conclusion,” said Garrett. “It’s not perfect insofar it won’t solve all the problems, but it’s a really good step in the right direction and I’m proud of it.”

Brian Coy, press secretary for Gov. McAuliffe, wasn’t immediately available to comment on whether he expected the governor to sign the bill.