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The Public Ought to Know: Public must protest big water rate hikes

By Corey Bearak

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When Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Famer Timothy B. Schmit (the Eagles) sang "lookin' back behind is such a silly game, but here we go again," the sentiments were about a relationship. Those words from Schmit's 1973 Poco song, "Here We Go Again," (memo to my conservative friends: maybe President Reagan or his advisers listened to my favorite band) certainly apply to the New York City Water Board's annual hearings. With a brief hiatus going into the 1993 mayoral election, this unelected body dominated by City Hall annually hikes what we pay for water.

This year the board proposes a 3 percent hike. It sounds modest, but that also applies to the sewer charge - currently a whopping 159 percent of your water tax. In a news article earlier this month, City Hall tried to blame the hikes on the cost of the necessary Third Water Tunnel. That project pre-dates the Water Board, created by the state in 1984 (chapter 513 of the laws of 1984). It really reflects the controversial and likely unnecessary filtration plant site underneath park land in The Bronx.

The Van Cortlandt Park site of the Croton Filtration Plant includes costs not usually associated with water and sewer projects paid by our water taxes; to mollify Bronx elected officials and communities - at least some of them -

the cost includes a few hundred million in park projects. These projects usually get funded through the city's capital budget.

City officials hide behind the crutch of a federal mandate to build the plant. The current and previous mayors and their Environmental Protection Commissioners failed to press Washington for the opportunity to follow an environmentally safe option that taxes our pockets much less. They failed to enlist our senators and members of Congress. It may not be as easy to make the case and to succeed, but advocacy to lighten the load on taxpayers always merits a chance.

This mayoral election year, it would be nice to know where those who seek to be mayor stand on this issue. As I told the City Charter Commission chairman and executive director last month, the process lacks real accountability. Over a year ago I pitched the need for legislation sponsored by Queens Assemblyman Mark Weprin to impose accountability in the rate-setting process. A mayoral candidate suggested the bill four years ago.

In 1994, when Councilman James Gennaro was a council staffer, Mayor Rudy Giuliani vetoed a bill I conceived after his aides negotiated the version passed by the Council. Only the Water Board's prompt resolution to delay setting its rates until after the City Council adopts the budget averted an override. Of course, the Giuliani administration's water board reneged and resolved to rescind that sound practice before its required 1999 implementation. As Council Environmental Protection Committee chairman, Gennaro has pushed the Water Board to propose lower increases.

Delaying rate-setting until after the city budget means better oversight that might shed light on the water system's rental payments to the city. This clear subsidy provided \$124 million in fiscal year 2004 to the general fund. These funds come out of the water taxes we pay. And for about every \$15 million, the rates could be reduced about 1 percent. This year that could mean a 5 percent rate rollback instead of the proposed 3 percent hike.

The public needs to step up. Send City Hall a message. Sign up, attend and oppose the rate hikes. The Queens Civic Congress already did. Choose the public hearing most convenient to you:

Monday, May 2, at 1 p.m. at the Department of Environmental Protection, 4th Floor Lecture Room, 59-17 Junction Blvd., Corona. Also 6 p.m. at the

College of Staten Island, Center for the Arts Recital Hall, 2800 Victory Blvd.

Tuesday, May 3 at 7 p.m. at Brooklyn College, Student Center-Alumnis Lounge, Room 409 (opposite Whitehead Hall), East 27th St. and Campus Road.

Wednesday, May 4 at 9:30 a.m. at Herbert Lehman College, Carman Hall, Room B-39, 250 Bedford Park Blvd. West, The Bronx. Also at 5 p.m. at St. John's University, Manhattan campus, 101 Murray St., Room 118.

Sign up and obtain the board's "Blue Book" describing proposed rate and billing changes by contacting Kevin Kunkle at 718-595-3601. For more information, go to the DEP Web site at <http://nyc.gov/html/dep/html/news/notices.html>.

If you can't get to the hearings, call 311 and tell the mayor: No more water rate hikes. Roll back our excessive water taxes.

And celebrate Earth Day tomorrow.

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