

8 Reasons You Can Use to Gain Your Customers' Support for Increasing Water Rates

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This document provides water utilities and municipalities with "talking points" they can use to build community support for gradual rate increases.

Many municipal leaders are concerned that residents will object strongly if asked to pay more for the water they consume – rate increases are necessary for maintaining the safety and supply of that water. At Tighe & Bond, our experience working with communities across New England has found that if those residents are made aware of the need to increase rates to maintain reliable, safe water they are quite willing to accept gradual increases.

Over the years I've participated in many rate meetings with municipal officials and residents. Through all those discussions, I've noticed that many residents simply aren't aware of how much they rely on their water supply and the costs required to collect it, treat it and deliver it to their homes. In pursuing rate increases to support infrastructure projects, I've found it's important to re-iterate eight core messages to residents:

- 1. The Need to Protect Public Health:** Waterborne diseases such as dysentery and cholera, spread by unsafe water supplies, used to kill thousands of people in New England communities. More recently we've seen communities with health issues related to microbes like Giardia and Cryptosporidium, naturally occurring contaminants like arsenic and radon, corrosion by-products like lead and copper, and to contamination from chemicals like pharmaceuticals and dry cleaning solvents. These and other waterborne health risks have been greatly reduced – but constant effort must be made to protect the water supply and delivery infrastructure, or such problems might recur. One only has to look to places like Flint, Michigan to see the problems that can result from inadequate water treatment and distribution infrastructure.
- 2. The Need for Public Safety:** Many communities benefit from the fire protection, and associated lower insurance rates, provided by public water supply systems. What people don't often realize, is that the need to provide adequate fire protection typically dictates the size of the pipes, pumps and storage tanks in a water system. This equipment loses firefighting capacity as it ages, and as other water needs in the system grow. Regular investment is needed to maintain desired fire protection.

8 Reasons to Invest in your Water Infrastructure	
1. Protect public health	Reduce bacterial threats from main breaks, sanitary deficiencies and treatment failures.
2. Protect public safety	Provide sufficient pressure and flow for adequate fire protection.
3. Enhance customer service	Water infrastructure requires maintenance and investment just like roofs, roads, or vehicles do. Insufficient investment leads to more frequent outages and unhappy customers.
4. Promote sustainability	Even in water-rich areas like New England droughts happen! Planning, conservation, and maintenance of infrastructure are all needed to keep the water flowing.
5. Protect the environment	Reduced leakage and water loss due to main breaks means more water in our rivers and streams.
6. Promote your economy	Adequate water supply is a differentiator for attracting jobs to, and keeping jobs in the community.
7. Control water rates	Planned investment in infrastructure improvements is less expensive than reactionary investment in infrastructure failure.
8. It's still only pennies!	Compare the cost of water to your cable, internet, cellphone, electricity and fuel bills. Water cleans up, hands down!

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- 3. The Need to Improve Customer Service:** Some of the water storage, treatment and piping systems in New England's communities are a century or more old – and like all old things, they deteriorate. It's easy to see when a roof, roadway or sidewalk needs repair or replacement – and a leaking roof or rough pavement has an obvious impact on users. Most water infrastructure is literally out of sight. That means that the deterioration isn't noticeable until it fails – maybe a water main that breaks, flooding a roadway and cutting off water service to thousands of residents. A program of regular, frequent maintenance and replacement of worn-out infrastructure is needed if the water supply network is to continue to do its job reliably.

- 4. The Need for Sustainability:** While water-rich compared to regions such as the country's southwest, New England still experiences water shortages. The summer of 2016 saw a drought of a magnitude not seen for decades. Some communities had to resort to emergency measures to keep their residents supplied with water. Restrictions were placed on non-necessary uses such as car-washing and lawn-watering. Many water sources and storage facilities have still not fully recovered from that event. While no one ran out of water during that dry summer, this is a distinct possibility if droughts continue to grow in severity, as seems to be happening. We need to invest in planning and conservation to ensure that we have an adequate water supply for the future.
- 5. The Need to Protect the Environment:** When we take water out of the ground or reservoirs for public water supply, it means that there is less left to support the ecology in our rivers and streams. Reducing withdrawals by investing in conservation and replacement of leaking water mains helps maintain natural streamflows and support local aquatic habitats.
- 6. Water is Important to Our Economy:** Many employers in New England depend on having access to plentiful and safe water for their employees and for their business. Without water, some organizations simply cannot operate – showing that water is important to the health of our region's economy. Schools, universities, hospitals and other services depend on having safe water supplies. Continuing to attract employers and residents to the area depends on a continued reputation of having reliable, safe water.
- 7. Investing Now Can Save in the Long Run:** Deferring investment in our aging infrastructure will lead to more frequent system failures and service interruptions. Over time it is more economical to be proactive and replace assets like water mains before they start breaking excessively, particularly if you consider indirect costs such as property damage and loss of income.
- 8. Public Water Supply is Already a Bargain:** Almost nothing that the average resident buys, costs as little as their water supply. It's pennies per gallon and always available when they need it. Residents pay much more for luxuries like cable TV and cell phone service, and even for water in bottles, than they do for public water supply, and safe water is essential to our lives

These eight reasons can go a long way to helping customers understand the importance of investing properly in the water infrastructure that serves them.

Armed with these talking points, local political leaders can push back effectively against the idea of "rate stabilization," the expectation that water rates will stay constant. Year-by-year inflation means that gradually, the spending power of those constant dollars declines. That means that each year, there is less spending power available to pay for maintenance, investment in new equipment, and repairs.

Watch for our upcoming article that will take this concept further – ideas that will help you explain to customers why gradual increases in funding are important to their continued well-being.



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