

## Water rebate program ends

By Mary Ford

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COHASSET - North Cohasset residents are going to see an increase in their water bills.

While water rates have not changed, the clock runs out this month on a 10-year rebate program approved in 1998 that affects customers of Aquarion Water Company of Massachusetts and those of 21 other districts. Residential customers in Hingham, Hull and North Cohasset will see an increase of about \$24.25 per quarter or \$100 annually. That means the amount the average customer pays would go from about \$549 to \$646 per year. Back in the 1990s state Sen. Robert Hedlund and then state Rep. Mary Jeanette Murray worked to grandfather in communities that had already built treatment plants to meet federal safe water act standards to receive reimbursements for certain costs.

“Essentially what had happened was the federal government created an incentive for communities to do what these 22 districts had already done,” state Rep. Garrett Bradley explained.

Aquarion’s predecessor, Mass-American Water Company, built the \$37 million treatment plant in Hingham that came on line in 1996.

“The Massachusetts legislation made \$8 million available annually for 10 years for reimbursement through a line item in the state budget,” Bradley explained. The federal government reimbursed the state for no more than 50 percent of that amount.

Bradley and Hedlund are sponsoring new legislation that would extend the reimbursement program for another 10 years because interest on the debt on the treatment plant was not part of the calculation of reimbursable costs. Post 1998, the federal government changed the rules from a straight grant program to low-interest loans that could include the cost of the debt service in the reimbursable amount. The 22 affected districts – including Aquarion’s customers in Hingham, Hull and North Cohasset – have not benefited from this change. “We think equity dictates,” Bradley said. The legislation would spread \$80 million in reimbursements over another 10 years.

Hedlund said he is proud to have created this program that resulted in significant savings for ratepayers over the last 10 years.

“With that 10-year program ending, we have been fighting hard to continue the program based on the issue of program equity,” Hedlund said. “Right now it is an uphill battle, but I will continue to fight for the ratepayers of my district.”

Bradley also said the bill could have a tough road ahead because the state is facing a \$1.3 billion deficit. If passed, the bill would not take effect until the end of the session in July.

In the meantime, the funding on the original program is running out at the end of January. For a more detailed explanation of the water rebate, see page 14.

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