

## Water pressure empties wallets

By Jon Brodtkin/ Daily News Staff

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**L**ocal water and sewer ratepayers were hit with the largest price increases in more than a decade this year, according to a survey of communities in the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority service area.

The average family's annual combined water and sewer bill increased 6.3 percent, from \$889 in calendar year 2004 to \$945 in 2005, said Joseph Favaloro, executive director of the MWRA advisory board, a watchdog group established by state law. Water and sewer rates rose 5.6 percent in 2004.

Soaring prices are largely due to capital investments like the MetroWest Water Supply Tunnel and new John J. Carroll Water Treatment Plant in Marlborough, Favaloro said.

"Over 60 percent of the MWRA's budget goes to pay for the existing debt of all of their capital projects. With that there isn't a light at the end of the tunnel," Favaloro said.

MWRA wholesale rates -- the price it charges municipalities -- are expected to rise an additional 44 percent, or \$208 million, through fiscal 2011.

The rates that residents pay are set by the communities they live in, and are based on both the MWRA charges and municipalities' costs to maintain and upgrade equipment.

The rate Framingham charges its residents increased 10.9 percent to an average of \$842.40 annually, according to the advisory board survey.

Residents faced hefty increases in Northborough and Marlborough, which get some of their water from the MWRA but provide their own sewer service. Northborough rates rose nearly 28 percent to \$744.32. Marlborough jacked prices up 14.4 percent to \$783.60.

The average bills are based on annual household usage of 90,000 gallons.

When Northborough raised rates, town officials blamed a 237 percent increase in its assessment from the MWRA, amounting to \$500,000.

On the flip side, Natick ratepayers saw their average bills decline 5 percent to \$993.80. Selectmen lowered the rates after learning of an accounting error that drained \$879,000 from Natick's water and sewer account over three years.

Marlborough had to absorb a 28 percent increase in its MWRA assessment because its 2004 water usage was unusually high, said Doran Crouse, assistant public works commissioner.

"The way the MWRA calculates their rates, they use the previous year's consumption at this year's prevailing rates. Where we used a lot of water the prior year it escalated this year's charge system," Crouse said.

The city also absorbed cost increases for chemicals it uses at a water treatment plant and water pumping station, Crouse said.