

## MWRA water rates soak some towns

By Michael Kunzelman / News Staff Writer

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**BOSTON** -- Water bills are soaring, but sewer customers face only a slight rate increase this year under a 0 million budget plan unveiled yesterday by the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority.

The combined rates for all MWRA water and sewer customers would increase by 5.7 percent, costing an average household an extra in fiscal 2006, which starts July 1, according to authority spokesman Jonathan Yeo.

Water customers would bear the biggest burden, with their rates increasing by 18.2 percent -- the largest hike for water rates since 1989.

Some MetroWest communities face above-average increases. For instance, water rates would increase 25.6 percent in Southborough, 26.5 percent in Weston, 28.4 percent in Marlborough and a whopping 237.4 percent in Northborough.

"It's troubling because it's on top of what have been aggressive property tax increases, as well," said state Rep. Stephen LeDuc, D-Marlborough.

Meanwhile, sewer rates would increase by a relatively modest 0.5 percent systemwide.

Ashland customers would see a 4.4 percent increase for sewer service, while Natick customers would see their sewer rates increase 2.3 percent.

Yeo said the rate increases are much higher for water customers because the MWRA is spending and borrowing the bulk of its money on capital projects designed to improve the water service, including a new treatment plant in Marlborough.

"There is a huge amount of work going on in the water system," he said.

"We're not just getting the same product. This money is directly going to pay for a safer, more reliant drinking water system."

Still, even some lawmakers are in sticker shock.

"Oh, my God," state Rep. Alice Peisch, D-Wellesley, said yesterday when she heard about the water rate increases for Weston, a town she represents. "I didn't understand that this kind of rate increase was in the offing."

Water and sewer rates would be about 2 percent cheaper if the Legislature preserves million in rate relief funding in the state budget.

For the third year in a row, Romney is trying to eliminate the funding, which was not part of the budget plan he unveiled last month.

"We're going to need more rate relief than the %%SUMMARY%% Gov. Romney has in the budget," Peisch said.

Many legislators are confident the rate relief money is safe this year because the new chairman of the influential House Ways and Means Committee is state Rep. Robert DeLeo, a Winthrop Democrat who is chairman of the Legislature's MWRA caucus.

"I expect that maintaining that money will be a priority for (DeLeo), as he has been a longtime champion of that effort," said state Rep. David Linsky, D-Natick.

Capital costs drive the need for rate increases, according to Yeo.

The MWRA budget would increase by .9 million in fiscal 2006, and .1 million of that is dedicated to debt service on capital projects.

"We have been keeping operating costs down through staffing reductions and automation, but operating expenses are only 33 percent of our budget," Yeo said.

To cut costs, Yeo said, the MWRA board also eliminated 19 planned sewer and water projects totaling 0 million.

The MWRA board of directors met yesterday to review the budget plan. The MWRA advisory board has 60 days to review the proposal.