



WSCAC Meeting

Location: Held virtually
May 8, 2020 – 10:00 am

Members in Bold in Attendance:

Michael Baram, WSCAC Chair

Whitney Beals

William Copithorne, Town of Arlington

Steven Daunais, Tata & Howard

Andrea Donlon, CT River Conservancy

Gerald Eves, Trout Unlimited

Bill Fadden, OARS

Bill Kiley, BWSC

Paul Lauenstein, NepRWA

Martha Morgan, Nashua River Watershed

Martin Pillsbury, MAPC

Janet Rothrock, League of Women Voters

Bruce Spencer

Kurt Tramposch, Wayland Wells

Roger Wrubel, Mass Audubon

Non-Members in Attendance

Lexi Dewey, WSCAC staff

Andreae Downs, WAC

Steve Estes-Smargiassi, MWRA

James Guidod, MWRA Advisory Board

Daniel Moss

Ace Peckham, WSCAC staff

Lou Taverna, MWRA Advisory Board

Lexi Dewey opened the meeting and announced that WSCAC is waiting to determine whether the June meeting, typically held at the Quabbin Reservoir, will be happening in person or virtually. She noted that the Quabbin Reservoir is 99% full, and spilling over the lower spillway.

Andreae Downs of WAC gave a quick note about her upcoming meeting (Friday, May 15th at 10:30, on energy use and conservation, with MWRA staff Denise K. Breitenreicher, Program Manager, Energy and Environmental Management, and Robert Huang, DITP Energy Program Manager), suggesting that interested people should email Andreae or Lexi for sign-in details. She also announced that WAC continues to follow news on testing for the corona virus in sewers across the country.

Lexi welcomed Steve Estes-Smargiassi, Director of Planning and Sustainability at MWRA, Lou Taverna, MWRA Advisory Board Chair and engineer for the City of Newton, and James Guidod, Finance and Policy Analyst for the MWRA Advisory Board.

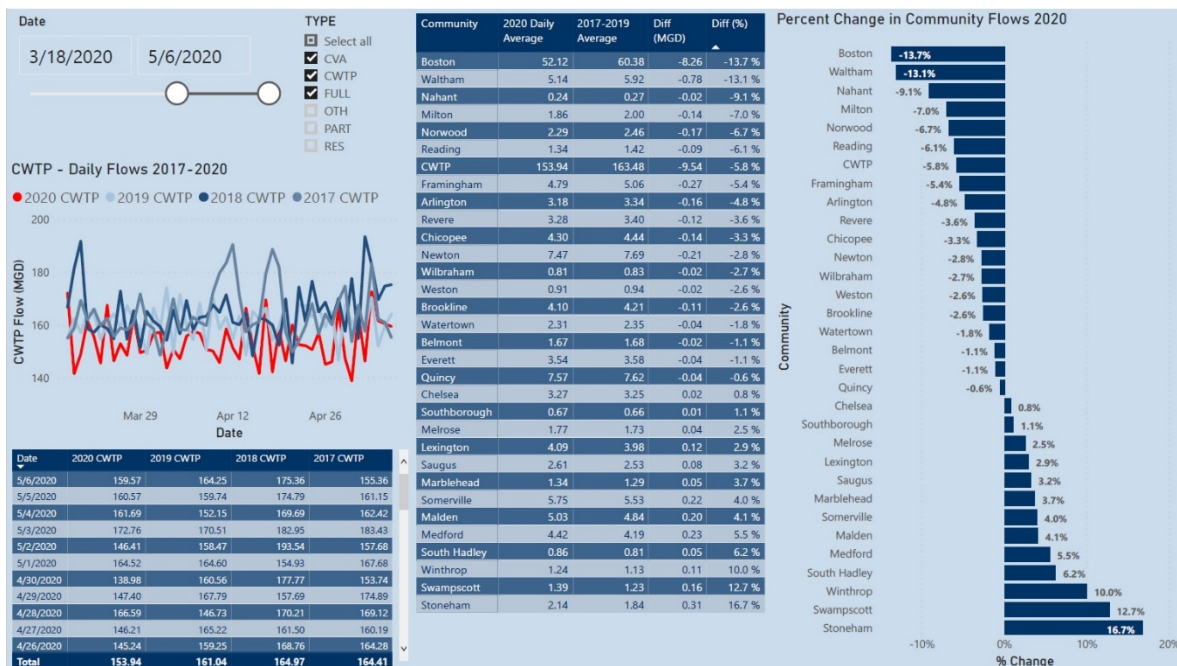
Steve opened by reassuring attendees that daily operations at the MWRA are running smoothly, albeit requiring extensive coordination, despite the difficulties posed by the recent outbreak of COVID-19. Many staff (400+), all of whom previously worked in offices at the Charlestown Navy Yard, Chelsea or elsewhere, are now working remotely (with special thanks to the IT department), and are proving to be very productive and efficient. The Navy Yard is empty, with an occasional exception of members of the financial department, who stop by to collect and distribute mail or handle checks.

Steve noted that for field staff, the MWRA has reduced numbers wherever they can, and rearranged schedules with A and B lists to reduce contact between staff as much as possible. For example, previously, when shifts change, the staff would assemble to review and debrief the events of the day. This process is now happening by phone, so the two groups do not share common space. Instead of carpooling, only one team member is allowed in a vehicle at a time. Staff are only performing essential maintenance (e.g. not mowing lawns), to be as efficient as possible. While this method isn't sustainable for long-term, it protects workers as much as possible for now.

Andreae Downs asked about tasks that aren't being done or delayed. Steve answered that some items are necessarily held up, such as reports in paper form, and gave an example of a plan that is made up of forty binders, each of which is waiting for a few final items. Since this project involves the need to distribute hard copies, it's been placed on temporary hold, until physical contact is safer. On the other hand, some projects are moving ahead faster.

Steve mentioned that one of the MWRA's concerns has been whether communities, when testing for water quality, would have to use less experienced samplers, be rushed, or use less optimal locations. This could result in the communities' water sampling techniques and results decrease in quality. The MWRA produced new instructions on how to take and test samples, and reached out to MWRA community water superintendents to share this information; the process has gone smoothly.

Steve shared a slide comparing the past week's water use to the average of the same week over three previous years. This allows for a comparison of what a MWRA community typically uses during this time of year. Some, like Boston, are predictably lower due to a decrease in commercial and industrial water use. Some suburban communities are seeing increases in use due to large numbers of people working from home. Cities like Chelsea, which have a high proportion of essential businesses, aren't seeing significant changes in water demand. Michael noted that the closure of the universities would affect water use as well, and Lou commented that hospitals are probably also seeing significantly higher water use.



Steve then referenced a report titled “[Financial Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on US Drinking Water Facilities](#)”, produced by the American Water Works Association (AWWA) and the Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies (AMWA). One obvious financial impact is that lower water demand means less revenue, but there are also additional factors, such as billing delinquencies. Since water shutoffs are prohibited during the outbreak of COVID-19, consumers who are struggling financially may opt to pay other bills such as rent or food, and not the water bill. This means that water departments may be seeing lower revenue. There are also additional costs to municipalities such as more frequent cleaning, or higher bills to pay for the ability to work remotely (e.g. phone bills).

Water and wastewater utilities hope that this report may help promote the need for increased funding to these sectors. As a quasi government agency, the MWRA doesn’t qualify for certain stimulus benefits (such as extending sick leave to personnel who have COVID), but this report might alter that.

Steve closed by asking all attendees to encourage their neighbors and friends not to buy bottled water, to reiterate the safety of MWRA’s water, and to not to flush wipes, gloves, or masks.

Kurt referenced an attempt by the town of Salisbury to reduce people coming to the area by refusing to turn water on in seasonal homes. This was used as a method of protecting workers, and to discourage out-of-towners from potentially transmitting COVID-19. He asked whether there were any restrictions in place to reduce the number of people moving to their vacation homes. Steve said that there isn’t a significant move into vacation homes that they’re seeing at this time (not that many in the MWRA service area).

Michael asked whether the MWRA has considered the implications of a recent [Supreme Court decision that groundwater is subject to the Clean Water Act](#). He noted that this is a huge change, and will introduce a complex regulatory requirement, opening up a potentially decades-long fight. Steve responded that it’ll be a very interesting question, and that the MWRA is not yet ready to offer observations at this time.

Lexi asked if there are any capital projects that will be delayed due to the proposed FY21 rate revenue changes. Steve commented that while it’s hard to make a project go faster, it’s possible that some projects will be slowed down.

Lexi followed up by asking whether existing water system redundancy projects are going to continue moving forward. Steve responded that the MWRA expects that to be the case. He noted that the MWRA has reviewed their own construction work and staff, implementing COVID safety plans (again, a new cost that they’re dealing with), and that some contracts may come back with a change order request, and may be slowed down or altered.

Michael asked if the MWRA has staff that is looking at changing work patterns. Office towers and malls may be used less, and suburban water use may increase while urban use is diminishing. Steve responded that at this time, it’s too soon to tell.

Lexi thanked Steve for his presentation.

Lexi noted there was a quorum and requested a vote on WSCAC’s April minutes. Bill Fadden moved to approve, Janet Rothrock seconded. WSCAC members voted by roll call, and the minutes were approved.

Lexi introduced James Guidod, Finance and Policy Analyst for the MWRA Advisory Board.

James opened by noting the typical procedure to approve the annual MWRA budget: MWRA submits the draft budget to the Advisory Board, which reviews and recommends changes, remaining mindful of the needs of both the MWRA and the communities. Normally, this process takes until June. This year,

however, communities are seeing a dramatic change in their water usage due to Covid 19. This can affect their rate revenue which influences the water department budget. In light of this, the Advisory Board and the MWRA Board of Directors voted in May for a 1% rate revenue requirement for FY21, and community loan deferral for communities to provide offer relief.

James discussed the two specific budget items: optional deferral for loan repayments, which offers towns greater flexibility, and the 1% rate revenue requirement increase. He emphasized that the Advisory Board is not canceling loans or creating a further burden for the MWRA. These changes will give communities more flexibility. James offered an example of a town which had a large industrial plant close. This resulted in a dramatic loss in water demand and thereby less revenue. The MWRA worked with the town to defer repayment with no rate revenue increase.

James pointed out that the rate revenue requirement over the past several years (and in the years to come) has been in the 3% range, with a goal of 2.4% by 2024. This year, the Advisory Board and the MWRA's agreed-upon 1% rate revenue increase will offer communities some relief and will allow MWRA to meet budget demands due to the use of reserves. See the Advisory Board presentation [here](#).

Lexi thanked James for his presentation, and introduced Lou Taverna, Chair of the MWRA Advisory Board and Chief Engineer for the City of Newton.

Lou explained that Newton is the second largest user of MWRA water and sewer services after the City of Boston. He pointed out that MWRA communities like Newton use water and sewer revenue to cover the cost of purchasing these services from the MWRA and maintaining community infrastructure. The revenue is based on the water and sewer bills. Newton's annual water and sewer budgets also include fixed costs (e.g. personnel, direct, indirect, material, equipment, and rent). For Newton, the MWRA annual rate assessment and loan repayment can run to 60-70% of the total water and sewer budget, so any reduction in those numbers is very helpful to the city.

To further the explanation, Lou provided a fictitious example: if a town needs \$10 million to fund their budget, and they typically sell 1 million cubic feet of water each year, they'll plan on charging \$10 per cubic foot (producing \$10 million in income). However, if the MWRA is lowering assessment amounts or deferring payments, that community can choose to reduce their prices per cubic foot to pass the assistance on to the public. He noted that the MWRA does a similar thing – once the budget has passed, the next step is to calculate rate revenue. The MWRA splits their costs between water and sewer revenue, and on the water side, the assessment is based on water flow share. In the current situation with COVID-19, BWSC is suddenly consuming less water, as compared to the other communities. If, in FY21 and FY22, Boston continues to use less water, they're going to be assessed a lower flow share, and other communities will be assessed more to make up for BWSC.

Lexi asked if Newton is planning to defer any infrastructure projects, and whether they anticipate that water bills will not be paid. Lou responded that Newton is not planning to defer projects; while they've had to shut some projects down like water main work that requires extensive contact with people, they plan to start the projects back up in the near future. They also expect that some people will be unable to pay their water bills, so the city is offering deferment options given that the water department is not able to shut off water service.

Michael asked about commercial customers, and Lou said that they can't be shut off either. He suggested that some businesses may choose to defer payment as well, such as Boston College, which typically has a very high water bill.

Lexi asked if the lower rate increase would cause Newton to review and alter their water budget. Lou confirmed and noted that the 1% rate revenue increase will only happen in FY21, so while Newton expects to see savings in FY21, they may not see them in future years, given that the MWRA will need to return to more normal rate increases.

Michael asked what happens when a commercial user or a school closes. Is the water shut off or does the line stay open? Lou answered that if the company or school is planning to reopen, the water remains on, but if it's closed on a permanent basis, the water is shut off. Steve added that they've been tracking research being done on how to get offices back online, explaining that if the building has water that's been stagnant for an extended period of time, there can be some health issues (e.g. bacteria in the water). Studies are currently underway to review the flushing of pipes or similar steps, to ensure the water is safe. A MWRA memo will be going out to superintendents shortly with instructions on how to flush water lines safely. Lou commented that Boston College, for example, will need to flush their pipes upon the return of the students. Michael asked if there's a fee for suspension of water service, and Steve responded that yes, many communities do charge for turning water off and on since it requires a physical crew to do so. The fee also helps cover ongoing costs to the system, such as pipe maintenance.

Lexi asked James whether partially supplied communities are able to take advantage of the loan deferral program and rate change, and Steve said that they are offered the option.

Lexi thanked the presenters, and the meeting was adjourned.