

Water district a step closer to reality

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Published: Tuesday, Apr. 13, 2004

NASHUA - An aldermanic committee Monday night approved a revised version of a charter that would establish a regional water district.

In approving the 29-page document, the Pennichuck Water Special Committee made one change that tightens the language on how budgets for the district would be passed, but chose not to change the charter's article on governance, which gives each community that joins the district one vote on the board of directors.

The central premise of the charter is for Nashua to acquire the regulated assets of Pennichuck Corp. through eminent domain then turn the water utility over to the regional district to own and operate.

Pennichuck is fighting the city's efforts.

The district would be called the Merrimack Regional Water District and would include Nashua and about 15 area towns.

Because about 75 percent of Pennichuck's customers live in Nashua, the city's votes on crucial decisions such as capital improvements, water rate and bond issues would carry more weight than those of the other communities.

The change approved by the committee Monday would prohibit the district's board of directors from approving budgets that would require an increase in water rates unless that increase was shown to be warranted during public hearings.

According to Aldermanic President Brian McCarthy, who chairs the committee, the panel's vote ends its analysis on the charter, which must still be approved by the full Board of Aldermen. It wasn't clear Monday when the full board will vote on the document, which must also be adopted by the other communities involved.

Under the measure, if three communities vote to join, the water district is established. But Nashua is the powerhouse in the process, and without the city's participation, the district would be virtually meaningless.

McCarthy said he envisions the creation of a body that would advise Nashua's representative on the board of directors how to vote on issues important to the vote on issues important to the city. An ordinance will be introduced soon, McCarthy said, that will spell out how that advisory body would be created.

McCarthy said even though the city will still have only one vote on the board, the weighted votes will protect Nashua's interests in how the district is run.

"I believe that the weighted voting ensures nothing untoward can happen," he said.

The revised charter the committee unanimously endorsed includes changes the city

made in the document in recent weeks, which were approved by a regional committee April 2.

The committee chose not to include changes recommended by local activist Barbara Pressly, who has helped spearhead the idea of the a regional water district and having the city acquire Pennichuck.

One change Pressly pushed for was a revision in the charter's language that allows the chairman to the board of directors to limit the amount of time that is called for recesses during board meetings. The recesses will be needed so a community's representative on the board and can confer with other officials before a vote is taken by the directors.

Allowing the chair to limit the recess time, Pressly said, could "cut short any need of Nashua's one member to discuss the issue with others before voting."

"This limits the usefulness for Nashua to have one vote with a team of advisers sitting behind him," she said. "The towns' strident opposition the our one delegate's ability to recess and confer as needed with advisers renders that charter as authored by the charter committee totally unacceptable."

Pressly also suggested each community have one delegate to the board per 5,000 ratepayers, giving Nashua five members, and that all votes be weighted by the number of ratepayers in each town.

The committee didn't act on the changes recommended by Pressly and spent less than an hour discussing the charter before recommending its final approval.