

Tough love for PWSA: State oversight by the PUC is justified

June 11, 2017 12:00 AM

By the Editorial Board / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Legislation that sailed through the state House last week would put the beleaguered Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority under the oversight of the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission. The additional scrutiny is sorely needed, and the unusual degree of bipartisan backing for the legislation would seem to underscore the genuine concern behind it.

For years, PWSA has been a blight on Pittsburgh, a symbol of backward government starkly at odds with the image the city tries to portray. Its customers have contended with poor service, incorrect billing and neighborhood flooding. They have seen the agency used as a dumping ground for political hacks and accumulate about \$750 million in debt while failing to keep pace with infrastructure needs. They were guinea pigs for a line warranty program that the agency tried to force down their throats, gaining a reprieve only when an Allegheny County judge ruled the shenanigan illegal.

The issue that brought PWSA's troubles to a boil was news about elevated levels of lead in the water and the question of how to deal with it. New blood joined the board of directors, and the board and city agreed to bring in a consultant to study the agency's future. These developments well may help to put the PWSA on course.

But PUC oversight is another responsible step, one that could afford outside expertise and guidance not unlike what the state-appointed financial overseers have provided to Pittsburgh for more than a decade under Act 47. Although far from perfect, oversight has helped the city to regain its financial footing. It hasn't hurt the city or forced officials to privatize assets. The only serious attempt at privatization — former Mayor Luke Ravenstahl's proposed long-term lease of parking garages and meters for a pension bailout — was defeated by city council in 2010.

The last point is important because some are balking at PUC oversight out of fear that it would put the agency on the road to privatization. House Speaker Mike Turzai, R-Marshall, who co-sponsored the PUC oversight legislation with Rep. Harry Readshaw, D-Carrick, has expressed interest in privatization in the past but says it's a "non-issue" now.

Democrats surely would kick up a fuss if privatization were to come up down the road. Mayor Bill Peduto has no problem with PUC oversight, but he'd fight tooth and nail to prevent a sale of city assets. The bottom line is that there's no reason to deny PWSA help now because of concern about a privatization attempt that might never come and would face substantial resistance if it ever did.

There will be other issues to watch, not least is whether oversight will lead to rate increases the PWSA board would be unlikely to make itself. On balance, we believe that oversight will help put the PWSA on track. The Senate should pick up the Turzai-Readshaw bill and pass it as expeditiously as the House has done.

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Pennsylvania House approves proposal to put PWSA under state commission

THERESA CLIFT [✈](https://twitter.com/TClift) (<https://twitter.com/TClift>) | Thursday, June 8, 2017, 11:27 a.m.



James Knox | Tribune-Review

Rep. Mike Turzai leaves after speaking to the media on Friday July 11, 2014, inside the Allegheny County Courthouse in downtown Pittsburgh.

A proposal to move the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority under the oversight of a state commission passed the House 195-0 on Thursday.

Pennsylvania House Speaker Mike Turzai, R-Marshall, and state Rep. Harry Readshaw, D-Carrick, sponsored the bill, which would place PWSA under the state's Public Utility Commission.

Lawmakers hope the move would help alleviate some of PWSA's issues.

The authority, which serves more than 500,000, has been exceeding a federal lead threshold for nearly a year, has more than \$700 million in debt, a revolving door of leadership and numerous customer service issues.

"PUC oversight is crucial to correcting the authority's long-standing difficulties. The PUC has the power to demand sound financial practices, systemic upgrades to infrastructure and reliable service delivery to customers," a news release from Turzai's office stated.

Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto has said he supports the legislation (<http://triblive.com/local/alleggheny/12338086-74/turzai-readshaw-team-up-on-proposal-to-put-pwsa-under-state-commissions>), though he was not consulted about it in advance.

The bill will now move to the state Senate.

Theresa Clift is a Tribune-Review staff writer. Reach her at 412-380-5669, tclift@tribweb.com or via Twitter @tclift.

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House vote expected Thursday on PWSA, PUC legislation

June 7, 2017 6:39 PM

By Adam Smeltz / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Legislation to place Pittsburgh's water authority under state Public Utility Commission oversight is bound for a final House vote Thursday in Harrisburg.

The proposal for the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority won preliminary approval in an initial House floor vote Wednesday. House Speaker Mike Turzai, R-Marshall, and Rep. Harry Readshaw, D-Carrick, have pushed the legislation, which they argued is necessary to help address fiscal, infrastructure and other problems at PWSA.

A companion bill is expected in the state Senate. Gov. Tom Wolf's administration has been evaluating the idea, according to a spokesman. The PUC generally oversees investor-owned utilities, regulating their rates and analyzing their technical and financial health. Bringing a municipal authority like PWSA under the PUC requires legislative action.

Adam Smeltz: 412-263-2625, asmeltz@post-gazette.com, @asmeltz.



Pittsburgh's water authority moves a step closer to control by Harrisburg

A final House vote could come as soon as Thursday; a similar measure will be introduced in the Senate.

SARAH ANNE HUGHES

JUN 05 2017 · 4:34 PM

Updated, 5:15 p.m.

With no discussion, a Pa. House committee voted to approve a bill that would put Pittsburgh's troubled water and sewer authority under state control.

The House Consumer Affairs Committee voted unanimously Monday to report bill 1490 as amended. The legislation would put the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority under Public Utility Commission oversight.

The bill — introduced by two Allegheny County lawmakers, Republican Mike Turzai and Democrat Harry Readshaw — is expected to get a vote on the House floor this week. A final vote could come as soon as Thursday.

“Over the last year, local and national newspapers have recounted the many service issues facing PWSA from multi-million dollar debt and uncollectibles, unmetered accounts, incorrect billing, system leaks and non-compliance with federal water quality mandates,” Readshaw and Turzai wrote in a co-sponsorship memo. “These issues call into serious question the sustainability of PWSA and the health and safety of those served by the system. The customers of PWSA need to know that their water is safe and that they are properly billed for their usage.”

The bill's bipartisan support among county lawmakers includes Democrats Dom Costa, Paul Costa, Dan Deasy, William Kortz and Anita Astorino Kulik and Republicans Hal English, Eli Evankovich, Mark Mustio, Jason Orbitay and John Maher.

State Sen. Jay Costa of Allegheny County plans to introduce similar legislation in the other chamber.

J.J. Abbott, a spokesperson for Gov. Tom Wolf, said via email, "The Governor is committed to looking at all options to help local governments solve generational problems with their water systems and aging infrastructure."

"The Administration is currently evaluating the proposal and will talk with the General Assembly and local leaders on this new legislation," Abbott continued.

PWSA has faced a number of issues over the past several years, from billing issues to higher-than-allowable levels of lead in drinking water. Most recently, the authority announced it was suspending a lead service line replacement program after a handful of tests showed elevated levels of lead after partial replacement.

Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto said in a statement his administration isn't "opposed to additional state cooperation to improve our water and sewer authority for residents of our city." But he added that "the legislation would need to assure residents of Pittsburgh that the water system remains a public asset, and that PUC oversight would not be used as a mechanism to force privatization."

Turzai has previously stated he supports the idea of selling PWSA through public auction. In addition to Peduto, Pittsburgh City Council member Deb Gross, Sierra Club Pennsylvania and Pittsburgh United's Our Water Campaign oppose privatizing PWSA.

Proposal advances for state oversight at PWSA

June 5, 2017 2:51 PM

By Adam Smeltz / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Legislation to place the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority under the state Public Utility Commission's oversight has cleared its first hurdle.

At a Capitol hearing Monday, the House Consumer Affairs Committee agreed without dissent to advance the bill for an initial floor vote that's slated for Wednesday. A second floor vote in the House is expected as soon as Thursday.

"We welcome oversight and help tackling the authority's issues," said Timothy McNulty, a spokesman for Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto. He said it was too early for him to speculate on the practical effects of PUC oversight.

House Speaker Mike Turzai, R-Marshall, and Rep. Harry Readshaw, D-Carrick, announced plans for the legislation last month, arguing the move is necessary to address long-standing problems at PWSA. The lawmakers cited newspaper reports about millions of dollars in debt, unmetered accounts, incorrect billing, system leaks and a lack of compliance with federal water quality requirements.

"The citizens served by the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority need safe water like everyone in the Commonwealth," Mr. Turzai said in an earlier statement. "The stability of the authority to serve its customers requires fiscal responsibility and best practices, both of which are lacking. We want to work collaboratively with the mayor and our colleagues in the General Assembly to address PWSA's persistent problems."

Last week, another difficulty surfaced: The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency alleged PWSA and the city Department of Public Works have been remiss in administering, monitoring and operating Pittsburgh's storm sewer system. PWSA's response to the nine alleged violations is due Monday.

"As the city administration and water and sewer authority were recently cited with alleged Clean Water Act violations, clearly some additional oversight may be necessary," House GOP spokesman Steve Miskin said. Companion legislation is expected in the state Senate.

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PWSA accused of violations of federal Clean Water Act

June 2, 2017 12:00 AM

By Don Hohey / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Add alleged violations of the federal Clean Water Act to the problems facing the beleaguered Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the PWSA, and to a lesser extent the city Public Works Department, has been remiss in administering, monitoring and operating its municipal separate storm sewer system and must fix the deficiencies.

The problems were identified during a two-day, on-site compliance inspection by EPA staff in early December and are highlighted in a four-page "opportunity to confer" letter dated May 18 and signed by Yvette Roundtree, senior assistant regional counsel at the EPA's Region III office in Philadelphia.

The EPA letter lists nine alleged violations, including:

Failure to accurately identify the number and location of all separate sewer outfall pipes into rivers and streams.

Failure to identify illegal sewage sewer connections into the separate storm sewer system.

Failure to conduct dry weather screenings and water quality sampling at sewer outfalls.

Failure to schedule or do annual and semiannual sewer facilities inspections.

Failure to conduct storm water awareness training for city employees.

The letter's violations were based on a 29-page EPA final inspection report that was completed in January and details the problems discovered by agency inspectors.

The charges are the latest blow to an authority already reeling from concerns about high lead water levels, water line maintenance backlogs, meter and billing problems, a boil water advisory in February and a revolving leadership door.

The PWSA and the city were given 14 calendar days to respond.

Rachel Rampa, a PWSA spokeswoman, said the authority's response is due Monday and was being written. She declined to respond to any of the specific charges Thursday.

Tim McNulty, a spokesman for Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto, said the city met with the PWSA to study the issues raised by the EPA, but he declined to comment further.

PWSA's original federal discharge permit was issued in September 2004. To prevent harmful pollutants from being washed or dumped into the storm water sewers, the EPA requires operators to operate under terms of their National Pollution Discharge Elimination System permits.

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Lawmakers propose state oversee PWSA; mayor not consulted

May 25, 2017 1:58 PM

By Karen Langley / Harrisburg Bureau

HARRISBURG — The speaker of the Pennsylvania House and another local state representative said Thursday they will introduce legislation to give the state Public Utility Commission oversight of the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority.

Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto said he only learned of the planned legislation yesterday.

"We haven't had a chance to see the bill," Mr. Peduto said. "We were not consulted."

House Speaker Mike Turzai, R-Bradford Woods, and Rep. Harry Readshaw, D-Carrick, said in a press release that oversight from the PUC is needed to address long-standing problems at the authority.

They said newspapers have reported on millions of dollars of debt, unmetered accounts, incorrect billing, system leaks and a lack of compliance with federal water quality requirements.

The legislators also said the system has thousands of lead service lines.

"The citizens served by the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority need safe water like everyone in the Commonwealth," Mr. Turzai said in the press release. "The stability of the authority to serve its customers requires fiscal responsibility and best practices, both of which are lacking. We want to work collaboratively with the mayor and our colleagues in the General Assembly to address PWSA's persistent problems."

The PUC can demand good financial practices, upgrades to infrastructure and reliable service delivery, they said.

"This legislation is about consumer protection and the health and safety of those served by the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority," Mr. Readshaw said. "This is really a commonsense approach that will move the system in a positive direction."


Asked for his reaction to a bill from a legislator who doesn't represent the city and who didn't talk to the city about it before proposing legislation, Mr. Peduto said when he heard about the legislation Wednesday night, he was surprised "as to why somebody who doesn't represent the ratepayers would be taking on this issue."




But, he said, "they do have the authority to look at this as a potential solution" and said that the proposal might lead to more transparency or other improvements in PWSA operations. He said the administration was open to looking "at how additional oversight could benefit the PWSA." But he said he wanted to emphasize that "we are not privatizing the PWSA. We have no interest in privatizing the PWSA." Mr. Turzai had suggested a sale of the authority among other assets a few years ago.

Mr. Peduto said he had been working with state, county and federal officials for past couple months on solutions, and said that among the potential fixes could be tapping Pennvest funds as early as this year to help fund improvements and repairs.

Chris Potter contributed.

First Published May 25, 2017 1:25 PM

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Turzai, Readshaw team up on proposal to put PWSA under state commission's control

BOB BAUDER  (<https://twitter.com/BobBauder>) | Thursday, May 25, 2017, 12:39 p.m.

Two Pennsylvania legislators on Thursday said chronic problems at the Pittsburgh Water & Sewer Authority motivated them to craft legislation that would put the authority under the oversight of the Public Utility Commission.

Pennsylvania House Speaker Mike Turzai, R-Bradford Woods, and state Rep. Harry Readshaw, D-Carrick, noted that PWSA has been plagued with numerous problems in recent years, including debt topping \$700 million, inaccurate billing and metering, inconsistent customer service and delinquent accounts. On top of that, they said, PWSA exceeds federal minimums for lead content in water and has been in violation of state water regulations.

PUC regulation might help resolve the problems, they said. Mayor Bill Peduto agreed.

"I think there are some areas where PUC expertise could be helpful," Peduto said, noting he was not consulted about the legislation in advance. "Initially, I was curious as to why somebody who doesn't represent the rate payers would be taking on this issue, but looking at it over the course of 12 hours, I've really had the opportunity to think about how having PUC oversight could actually benefit, especially in issues of transparency."

Turzai said the PUC can offer professional help in addressing PWSA's problems. He and Readshaw sent Peduto a letter Thursday outlining their views.

"It's about changing the operation of the PWSA," Turzai said. "The Public Utility Commission can do that. It has oversight over debt, it has oversight over metering and billing and it has some jurisdiction over some environmental concerns. The PUC basically ensures the stability of utilities, both in terms of their fiscal responsibilities and consequentially their ability to provide services in a responsible and safe manner."

Peduto has estimated it would cost \$4 billion to \$5 billion to upgrade PWSA's century-old infrastructure. He has convened panels to guide restructuring of the authority, and PWSA's board of directors has hired a Maryland-based consulting firm to seek solutions.

The mayor said he's seeking a state PennVest loan to help pay for replacement of lead water service lines in the city.

"We are at the same time looking at how could this additional oversight benefit the PWSA and most importantly provide transparency and accountability to the ratepayers," he said. "We want to basically solve this problem, but again it will take time and take money."

Readshaw said he has received numerous complaints from constituents billing and water quality concerns.

"I think with oversight there will be reassurance to residents of the city of Pittsburgh who are affected by that agency," Readshaw said. "I just think it would be of assistance if the PWSA had some oversight."

Turzai said state lawmakers in the 1990s approved PUC oversight for a public natural gas company in Philadelphia.

Readshaw said a PWSA fix would be costly.

"Unfortunately there's no free ride on any of that," he said. "I understand all of that, but I think this is a good beginning point for a conversation long term."

Bob Bauder is a Tribune-Review staff writer. Reach him at 412-765-2312 or bbauder@tribweb.com (<mailto:bbauder@tribweb.com>).

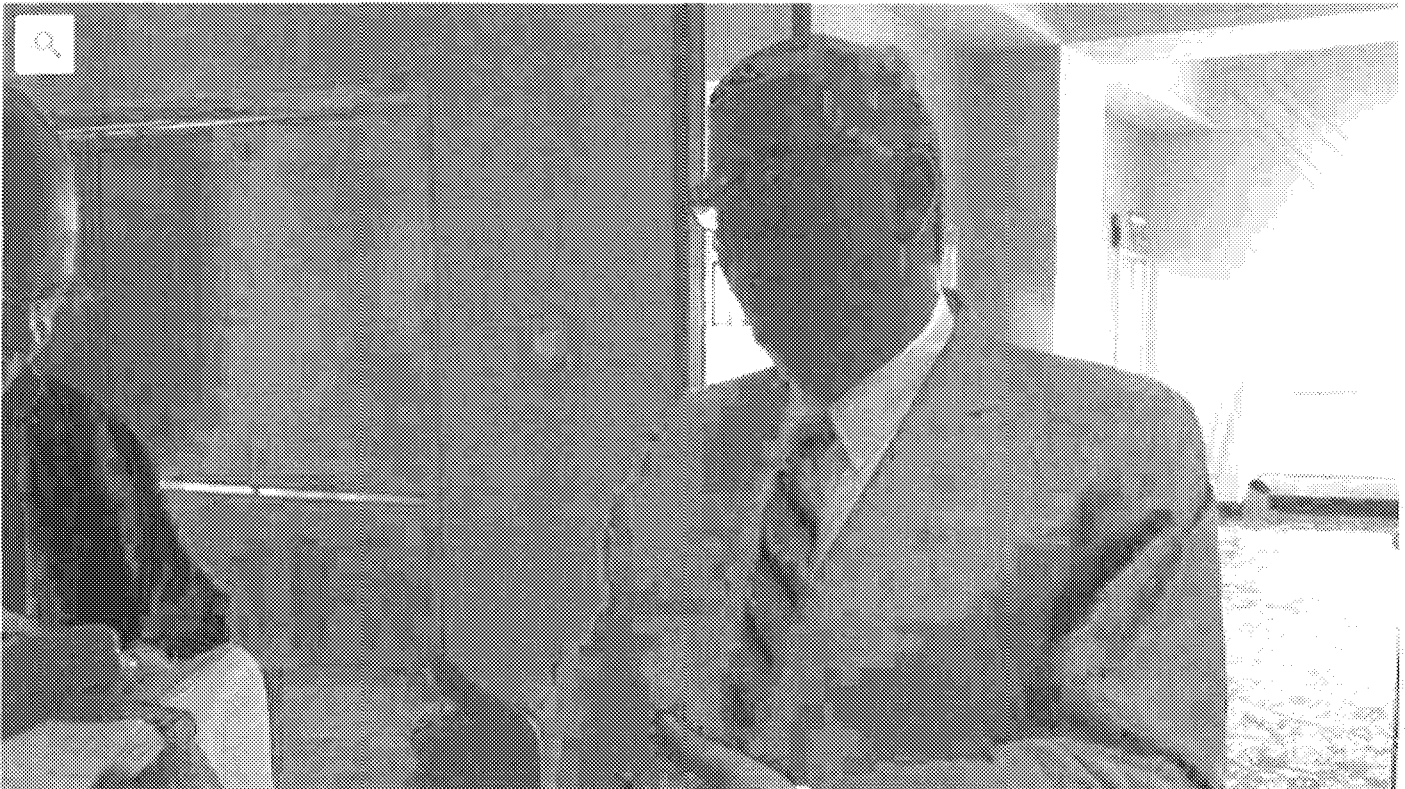
Staff Writer Aaron Aupperlee contributed.

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State representatives to introduce legislation for Public Utility Commission to oversee PWSA

Updated: May 25, 2017 - 1:45 PM



HARRISBURG - Pennsylvania state government representatives are introducing legislature to place the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority under the oversight of the Public Utility Commission, House Speaker Mike Turzai and Rep. Harry Readshaw announced in a release Thursday.

The release highlighted many issues the PWSA has dealt with as a primary factor for placing it under PUC oversight.

"This legislation is about consumer protection and the health and safety of those served by the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority," said Readshaw. "This is really a commonsense approach that will move the system in a positive direction."

Tonight on Channel 11 News at 5, why one state legislator says this is the only way to fix the embattled PWSA and how the city is responding.

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The PWSA has faced several issues in the past year, including multi-million dollar debt and uncollectibles, unmetered accounts, incorrect billing, system leaks and noncompliance with federal water quality mandates.

Additionally, the system has thousands of lead service lines, many of which have not been identified or located, the release said.

Pittsburgh mayor Bill Peduto said Thursday that the city was not consulted before state legislators announced the bill.



Mayor @billpeduto says city was not consulted before state legislators announced bill to put PWSA under Public Utility Commission oversight

12:49 PM - 25 May 2017

1

Although, Peduto added that the city is not against additional state regulation of the PWSA. He said they are already working with the Department of Environmental Protection in restructuring utility.

Peduto's office announced back in April that the Infrastructure Management Group would manage a possible restructuring of the utility.

The group was comprised of four finalists who made presentations to the Blue Ribbon Panel and the mayor's office.

"After decades of disinvestment and neglect, the PWSA is in need of billions of dollars of long-term infrastructure improvements. It can't borrow its way out of the problem, or implement giant rate increases by residents," Peduto said in a news release in April. "IMG will help us study the best way to keep the city's water asset public, while addressing the improvements that have been ignored for the better part of a century."

Channel 11 learned in April that all options except an outright sale of the utility are on the table.

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Pittsburgh residents filled up water containers during a precautionary flush and boil advisory in February 2017. JASMINE GOLDBAND / THE INCLINE

Bipartisan bill proposes putting Pittsburgh's water authority under state oversight

"The customers of PWSA need to know that their water is safe and that they are properly billed for their usage."



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MAY 25 2017 · 12:53 PM

Updated, 2:42 p.m.

Two lawmakers from Allegheny County are proposing to put Pittsburgh's troubled water and sewer authority under the oversight of the state.

House Speaker Mike Turzai and Rep. Harry Readshaw, a Democrat who represents part of Pittsburgh, plan to introduce a bill that would put PWSA under Public Utility Commission oversight.

"Over the last year, local and national newspapers have recounted the many service issues facing PWSA from multi-million dollar debt and uncollectibles, unmetered accounts, incorrect billing, system leaks and non-compliance with federal water quality mandates," the lawmakers wrote in a co-sponsorship memo (<http://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/legis/CSM/showMemoPublic.cfm?chamber=H&SPick=20170&cosponId=23989>). "These issues call into serious question the sustainability of PWSA and the health and safety of those served by the system. The customers of PWSA need to know that their water is safe and that they are properly billed for their usage."

The bill would require PWSA's board of directors "to bring the system into compliance with the requirements of Title 66 of the PA Statutes [the section that governs public utilities (<http://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/legis/LI/consCheck.cfm?txtType=HTM&ttl=66>)] and PUC regulations applicable to investor-owned water and wastewater utilities," the memo states. The lawmakers note that this move would not be unprecedented, as PUC was given oversight of Philadelphia Gas Works in 1999.

PWSA has faced years of complaints about billing issues (<http://www.pghcitypaper.com/Blog/archives/2016/07/07/pwsa-addresses-water-quality-and-billing-problems>), but concerns about high lead levels in the water at some residences have taken center stage. The city is currently distributing thousands of free water pitchers as a stopgap measure and recently hired Maryland-based Infrastructure Management Group Inc. to handle a possible restructuring (<http://triblive.com/local/allegheny/12231545-74/pittsburgh-selects-firm-to-restructure-pwsa-for-900k>) of PWSA.

Pittsburgh City Council has requested (<http://www.post-gazette.com/news/politics-local/2017/02/02/City-Council-unites-to-request-state-reviews-of-PWSA/stories/201702020229>) an audit of PWSA by Auditor General Eugene DePasquale, which the mayor's office and PWSA have voiced support for.

"We are not opposed to additional state cooperation to improve our water and sewer authority for residents of our city, and we have been working hard with the state Department of Environmental Protection to complete a full restructuring of PWSA," Mayor Bill Peduto said in a statement. "We welcome further

conversations about this proposed PUC legislation, and are already inviting additional oversight and financial support from Harrisburg to help us rebuild our water system. The legislation would need to assure residents of Pittsburgh that the water system remains a public asset, and that PUC oversight would not be used as a mechanism to force privatization.”

Peduto told reporters that his office was not notified about the proposal, Aaron Martin of *WPXI* tweeted.

A spokesperson for the Public Utility Commission told *The Incline* the agency “will carefully review the legislation.”



Aaron Martin
@WPXIAaronMartin

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1



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. @billpeduto added city is not against additional state regulation of PWSA. Says they're already working w/ DEP in restructuring utility

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Pa. Lawmakers Want PUC To Oversee PWSA

May 26, 2017 5:24 AM By Amy Wadas

Filed Under: Amy Wadas, DEP, Harry Readshaw, Mayor Bill Peduto, Mike Turzai, Pittsburgh Water And Sewer Authority, Public Utility Commission, PUC, PWSA

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PITTSBURGH (KDKA) — Two local lawmakers plan to introduce legislation to put the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority under the oversight of the Public Utility Commission.

House Speaker Mike Turzai (R-Allegheny) and Rep. Harry Readshaw (D-Allegheny) are working together on the legislation.

The PWSA has dealt with several issues over the years from multi-million dollar debt and incorrect bills to the current issue of replacing thousands of lead service lines.

“The citizens served by the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority need safe water like everyone in the Commonwealth,” said Turzai. “The stability of the authority to serve its customers requires fiscal responsibility and best practices, both of which are lacking. We want to work collaboratively with the mayor and our colleagues in the General Assembly to address PWSAs persistent problems.”

“This legislation is about consumer protection and the health and safety of those served by the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority,” said Readshaw. “This is really a commonsense approach that will move the system in a positive direction.”

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Turzai said the PUC has the power to demand sound financial practices, systemic upgrades to infrastructure and reliable service delivery to customers.

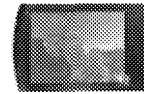
Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto says the city isn't opposed to help from the state as they work with the DEP on a full restructuring of the PWSA.

He said, "We welcome further conversations about this proposed PUC legislation, and are already inviting additional oversight and financial support from Harrisburg to help us rebuild our water system. The legislation would need to assure residents of Pittsburgh that the water system remains a public asset, and that PUC oversight would not be used as a mechanism to force privatization."

Amy Wadas

Pittsburgh native Amy Wadas joined KDKA as a reporter in July of 2014. VITALS Joined KDKA: July 2014 Hometown: Pittsburgh Alma Mater: Chartiers Valley High School and Penn State University FAVORITES Music: Electronic...

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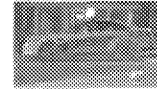


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