

Hasten public takeover of Nassau water utility

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Without any incentive to negotiate, Liberty Utilities isn't doing enough to expedite a public takeover. Credit: Newsday/Drew Singh

By The Editorial Board

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In November 2021, Gov. Kathy Hochul signed legislation to create two Nassau County water authorities — one for the North Shore, one for the South Shore. She said then: "Water is a necessity that every New Yorker should have easy, affordable access to."

Nearly four years later, Nassau County residents still don't have easy, affordable access to their water supply. Instead, they're charged astronomically high rates, accompanied by opaque and insufficient explanations and documentation from Liberty Utilities and the state Public Service Commission.

In the latest example, customers in one Nassau service area were told last year they'd see a 17% increase, when it was in fact 27%. Then, they saw another 15% hike in April. Next year, according to PSC documents, there'll be another 9% rate increase on top of the already-high bills.

All of this comes as the Water Authority of the North Shore, or WANS, claims Liberty is not negotiating in good faith in the effort to sell its assets and work toward a public takeover. Liberty says it is, but none of the efforts — including those with the Massapequa Water District and the South Shore Water Authority — have made much public progress.

It's time for the state to stop testing the waters.

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A timeline for the move from private water to public water, laid out in 2021, outlined a plan that would result in a purchase agreement within 465 days from when Liberty closed on its acquisition of New York American Water, on Jan. 1, 2022.

It's been more than 1,300 days.

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That's unfair to Liberty's water customers. Without any incentive to negotiate, and without any disincentive to delay, Liberty hasn't done enough. The newly established Nassau authorities, too, can do better, especially in terms of holding public meetings, communicating with ratepayers regularly and taking next steps.

It's up to Hochul to insist the PSC expedites this process. The commission, which approved Liberty's eye-popping rate increases, has done little to assist customers. The PSC must serve as mediator. Pushing the process along could begin with jump-starting an independent, updated analysis of the assets and infrastructure, including determining ownership and appraising current value.

Basically, the PSC has to step up as the regulator. It appears no one is paying enough attention or working to meet customers' needs, save for some advocates and local lawmakers. The PSC and Liberty aren't responsive and transparent enough.

Almost all state residents, including those in Suffolk County and most Nassau residents, benefit from public water. It's time for all of Nassau to have that opportunity. If the PSC doesn't do its job, and Liberty and the local authorities don't make immediate progress, Hochul must step in. She rightly advocated for the move to public water and signed the legislation. She must see it through.

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