



Advocacy & Accountability

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Thursday, January 9, 2025

Hybrid Meeting

10:00 AM

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING SUMMARY

A. Roll Call Attendance

A commencing roll call voted as follows:

Name	Community	Vote
Michael Rademacher	Arlington	Here (remote)
John Sullivan	Boston (BWSC)	Here (remote)
David Pavlik	Lexington	Here (remote)
Yem Lip	Malden	(arrived after vote)
Nicholas Rystrom	Revere	Here (remote)
Richard Raiche	Somerville	Here (in person)
Sam Stivers	Southborough	Here (in person)
John P. DeAmicis	Stoneham	Here (in person)
Maurice Handel	MAPC	Here (in person)

Also in attendance:

Lou Taverna (in person), Andy Pappastergion (remote), Christine Bennett, Nathan Coté, Matthew Romero, Keira Kishnani

B. Executive Director's Report

Matthew Romero, Executive Director of the MWRA Advisory Board, opened the meeting by acknowledging the national day of mourning for former President Jimmy Carter. He then welcomed Keira Kishnani, a new co-op student from Northeastern University, who will assist with budget-related tasks. He explained that Ms. Kishnani will continue the work started by Kareen Sud, who recently completed her co-op term. Additionally, Mr. Romero congratulated former Advisory Board staff member Travis Ahern on his new role as Executive Director of the Cannabis Control Commission, humorously commenting on their text conversations during the selection process.

Mr. Romero highlighted an upcoming public meeting on January 22 at 6 PM regarding the Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO) Long-Term Control Plan. He emphasized the importance of Advisory Board member attendance to ensure ratepayers' perspectives are represented, noting a



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historical lack of participation from those advocating fiscal responsibility. He confirmed that a follow-up notice with details and the registration link would be sent to members. Mr. Raiche clarified that the meeting, jointly organized by MWRA, Cambridge, and Somerville, is intended for the general public as a progress report on the CSO plan. Mr. Raiche underscored the imbalance in advocacy, with environmental groups prioritizing pristine water bodies without considering fiscal constraints. He urged attendees to address broader infrastructure challenges such as flooding and aging systems.

Mr. Romero discussed the MWRA Board of Directors' recent decision not to approve salary increases for non-union staff, pending a staffing and wage equity study. He invited Mr. Pappastergion to elaborate. Mr. Pappastergion explained that the study, suggested months ago by MWRA Board member Henry Vitale of Boston, will provide guidance on future benefits, salaries, and equity among non-union roles. It will also address "compression" issues, where managers earn close to their subordinates as well as "collision" issues where managers can earn less than their subordinates. He confirmed the study was already underway. Mr. Sullivan inquired about the study's timeline, and Mr. Pappastergion confirmed it had begun. Mr. Romero noted that he advocated for the study during previous discussions and suggested Advisory Board participation in the consultant selection process to enhance transparency. He added that Ms. Gillen, Director of Administration, agreed with his recommendation and confirmed his inclusion on the selection committee.

Mr. DeAmicis asked whether the study would address staffing levels. Mr. Romero clarified that the focus is on non-union positions, with a comprehensive review of job descriptions, salaries, and responsibilities. Mr. Taverna commented on the longstanding staffing shortages at MWRA and questioned retention strategies for retiring staff. Mr. Romero confirmed these challenges were part of the study's scope. Mr. Raiche shared his experience with a similar study in Somerville, warning about wasted efforts due to poor consultant focus and offering lessons learned to aid MWRA's process.

Mr. Romero provided a legislative update, reporting on meetings with Representatives Phillips, Giannino, Kushmerek, and Kilcoyne to support a proposed water omnibus bill. This strategy aims to bundle various legislative initiatives to appeal to a wide range of stakeholders. He described it as a "buffet-style" approach, allowing legislators to find elements relevant to their communities. Mr. Handel expressed interest in collaborating through the MAPC Legislative Committee. Mr. Romero agreed to share draft language for review and emphasized the need for a new legislative champion following Ms. Dykema's departure. He highlighted the high turnover in the legislature, suggesting that junior legislators could take up the cause.

Mr. DeAmicis asked about the status of a proposed water tax. Mr. Romero confirmed it would likely be refiled, adding that MWRA and Advisory Board staff are preparing to address the related public hearing in early 2025. He discussed concerns about expanding a system expansion study, noting that some proposals extend beyond MWRA's scope and could burden ratepayers.



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Mr. Romero mentioned a recent legislative briefing where various stakeholders, including Mass Waterworks and the 495 Partnership, emphasized the importance of water infrastructure for housing and economic development. He noted engagement from legislators and shared optimism about the session's priorities. Finally, he reported on the reintroduction of a bill addressing the labeling of non-flushable wipes, with hopes by various stakeholders for its passage this session.

C. December Advisory Board Holiday “Open House” review

Matthew Romero began by thanking everyone who attended last month's Holiday Open House. He shared that feedback from MWRA staff, Advisory Board members, and the town of Lexington, which hosted the event, was overwhelmingly positive. Attendees appreciated the opportunity to reconnect and have informal conversations, similar to those that occurred during in-person meetings before the pandemic. Mr. Romero asked attendees if they would like the event to become an annual tradition, noting that earlier planning could make it less stressful and hopefully improve attendance in future years. He also acknowledged that the venue, which had been used in the past, was well-received. He thanked Mr. Pavlik for negotiating a discount to make the event possible.

Mr. Pavlik expressed appreciation for the event and the venue, highlighting the importance of interactions between community members and MWRA staff. He suggested including introductions of MWRA staff, such as Lisa Bina, Valerie Moran, and Tori MacMullin, at future events to help members better understand their roles and contributions. Mr. Pavlik thanked the staff and reiterated his enjoyment of the event.

Mr. Romero noted that, if made an annual tradition, the Holiday Open House would complement the annual field trip in August. He proposed rotating the event location throughout the MWRA service area to ensure geographical balance, mentioning potential future locations such as Canton, Stoughton, or western communities. He humorously acknowledged that the venue might not always be as convenient for Mr. Pavlik but would be closer for other members in different years.

Mr. Romero emphasized the challenge of planning additional events during the second half of the fiscal year, which is often busier for both member communities and MWRA. He invited further suggestions for maintaining and building in-person connections, noting that the idea for the open house came from a combination of suggestions, including those from Ms. Elena Proakis Ellis and others. He expressed optimism about continuing these efforts to strengthen relationships across the MWRA and Advisory Board community.

D. Budget Dashboard – Quick Reference Guide

Matthew Romero transitioned to the next agenda item, the budget dashboard. While Christine Bennett prepared to present it, Mr. Romero provided context, explaining that the dashboard was developed based on feedback from Advisory Board members and his own experience. He noted that the dashboard serves as a quick reference guide for frequently asked questions, such as the





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current wholesale water rate, and incorporates additional suggestions, including those from former member Mr. Sanchez. He then invited Ms. Bennett to present.

Christine Bennett introduced the "quick reference dashboard," the second in a planned three-part series. She walked attendees through the dashboard, explaining its features and functions. The dashboard includes high-level visualizations for key data points, such as the capital improvement program (CIP) budget and current expense budget (CEB), with hyperlinks to detailed documents for further exploration. Ms. Bennett highlighted that these documents, such as the 300-page CIP and CEB documents, are now easily accessible through the dashboard, addressing previous challenges in locating them on the MWRA website.

Ms. Bennett emphasized other key sections of the dashboard, including tiles for fiscal year 2025 water and sewer assessments, rate revenue requirements, and forecasts for the CEB and rate revenue through fiscal year 2029. She noted that some features, like links to the "Carroll Sheet" for forecasts, were still under development but would be added soon. Additionally, the dashboard includes frequently requested information, such as wholesale water and retail sewer rates, water use and system share data, and reservoir levels, all linked to relevant resources.

Mr. Sullivan suggested adding a particular wastewater component report to the dashboard, which breaks down wastewater allocations by sanitary flow, infiltration, and inflow for each community. He described it as a valuable tool for financial planning and demonstrating the impact of spending on infiltration reduction. Ms. Bennett agreed to include this feature, noting it as a useful addition for Advisory Board members.

Ms. Bennett also described other dashboard features, such as links to historical data on water system demand, precipitation, and spillage. She pointed out that the dashboard includes dense information from the MWRA website in a more user-friendly format. Responding to a suggestion from Mr. Taverna, she agreed to look into graphics showing the percentage of debt service relative to the CEB over time, a feature valued in the past but no longer readily available.

The presentation concluded with Ms. Bennett demonstrating how members could access, print, or download the dashboard directly from the Advisory Board website. She mentioned that the November CEB dashboard was already available online, with December updates forthcoming. Additionally, she announced that a CIP budget dashboard was under development and would be unveiled soon.

Mr. Romero thanked Ms. Bennett for her presentation and reiterated the importance of member feedback in refining the dashboards. He shared plans to present the CIP dashboard in February and to streamline the monthly creation process to reduce staff workload. He emphasized the team's commitment to improving the dashboards as valuable tools for members.

E. Water & Sewer Rate Survey preview



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Matthew Romero opened the discussion on the survey preview by praising Nathan Coté for his work on the MWRA Advisory Board's Rate Survey. Mr. Romero recounted how Mr. Coté, during his co-op term last year, managed to complete the survey despite limited resources, ensuring it was ready before the end of the fiscal year. He highlighted Mr. Coté's transition to a full-time role, where he began work on the 2024 survey and noted that this year's survey is nearly complete, pending final confirmations from respondents.

Mr. Coté presented a preview of the survey, explaining that it includes detailed charts and data visualizations for water and sewer rates across MWRA communities. He shared scatter plots and comparative graphics illustrating rate trends, such as the lowest water rates (Burlington, Everett, Clinton) and the highest (Winthrop, Reading, Dedham, and Hingham). The average water rate increase was $\approx 6.5\%$, with some communities, such as Bedford, Braintree, and Randolph, experiencing under 1% increases. For sewer rates, the average annual cost was $\approx \$1,200$, with Cambridge, Belmont, and Somerville among the highest, and Woburn and Winchester among the lowest. Sewer rate increases averaged $\approx 6.7\%$, with notable hikes in Chicopee (25%), Dedham (20%), and Bedford (18%).

Mr. Coté also discussed combined water and sewer rates, noting an average cost of $\approx \$2,018$, with Clinton, Woburn, and Burlington having the lowest combined rates, and Winthrop and Somerville among the highest. He highlighted efforts to ensure data accuracy by comparing self-reported water usage across communities, revealing variations like Quincy's low usage and Weston's high usage per household.

This year, the survey included supplemental questions on stormwater, PFAS, lead, and copper regulations, allowing for a more comprehensive narrative. Mr. Coté showcased updates to the community pages, demonstrating improvements in layout and added information. He also mentioned the inclusion of national comparisons with cities like Seattle and Las Vegas, emphasizing the importance of providing detailed insights alongside geographic diversity.

John Sullivan raised a question about whether stormwater fees were included in sewer rates. Mr. Coté clarified that stormwater fees were separated when identified, but he committed to double-checking for accuracy. Richard Raiche and Mr. Romero expanded on the need to understand how communities manage stormwater fees, noting that some integrate them into sewer bills while others fund them through general funds. Mr. Romero suggested revisiting historical data to better understand shifts in funding and proposed publishing an appendix to the survey with detailed stormwater information.

Richard Raiche pointed out the need to account for CSO (Combined Sewer Overflow) long-term control plans when benchmarking rates against other cities. Christine Bennett shared a podcast recommendation, "Backed Up," which highlighted Cincinnati's unique combined sewer system and regulatory challenges. Mr. Romero encouraged sharing the podcast as a resource for further learning.



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John DeAmicis commended the inclusion of more cities in the national survey, emphasizing its value in benchmarking MWRA rates against national trends. Maurice Handel cautioned about varying costs of living across cities, which can influence rate comparisons. Mr. Romero noted that this year's additions aimed for broader geographic representation and expressed interest in continuing to expand the survey.

In conclusion, Mr. Côté expressed pride in the level of detail in MWRA's national pages compared to other surveys. He also noted that the University of North Carolina conducted its Massachusetts survey this year, providing an opportunity for the Advisory Board to compare research. Unlike the Advisory Board's annual survey, UNC's survey appears to be conducted sporadically.

F. Public Comment Policy discussion

Mr. Romero introduced the topic of a proposed public comment policy, mentioning that the draft policy incorporated feedback from previous meetings and included redlined versions submitted by Mr. Raiche and Mr. Stivers. Additionally, Mr. Stivers shared a Supreme Judicial Court opinion relevant to public comment policies, which he had experience with from his municipality. Mr. Romero emphasized that the policy is important to ensure order during public meetings and outlined two potential approaches: one reflecting a formal written version of the Advisory Board's current approach and another adding a structured public comment period via a new written policy. Mr. Raiche noted that while the previous informal approach aligns with the Advisory Board's representative structure, it could appear as an attempt to limit public access, especially in cases involving persistent advocacy groups.

Mr. Stivers advocated for a formal, clear, and focused policy to prevent disruptions and set expectations. He suggested a specific time limit for public comments and noted that such policies are necessary to avoid chaotic scenarios. Mr. Handel supported this position, emphasizing that policies help manage challenging situations. Mr. Pavlik countered that the Advisory Board's role should include ensuring ratepayers first address their concerns locally, with their town or city representatives acting as the intermediary to bring issues to the board if necessary.

During the discussion, board members raised concerns about accessibility and engagement in communities with less active representatives. Mr. DeAmicis pointed out that in such cases, requiring residents to go through representatives might be seen as an additional barrier. He preferred a straightforward, accommodating policy allowing direct public input with limited speaking time.

Mr. Rademacher suggested balancing transparency and control by permitting brief public comments without expecting immediate responses or actions from the board. This, he felt, would help prevent disruptions while allowing ratepayers to be heard. Several members agreed that listening is usually beneficial, as it can reveal issues otherwise overlooked.





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Ultimately, the consensus leaned toward merging elements of both proposed approaches. The policy would include clear guidelines for public comments, time limits, and criteria for managing disruptions, while maintaining a channel for residents to communicate directly with the Advisory Board. Mr. Romero agreed to draft a revised version incorporating these suggestions for review and a possible vote at the February Executive Committee meeting.

G. Action Item- Approval of the January 16, 2025 Advisory Board meeting agenda

A motion was put forth to approve the Advisory Board meeting agenda for January 16, 2025. It was moved by Maurice Handel, seconded by Sam Stivers, and added to the omnibus vote at the end of the meeting.

H. Action Item- Approval of Executive Committee meeting minutes from November 14, 2024

A motion was put forth to approve the Advisory Board meeting minutes for November 14, 2024. It was moved by Maurice Handel, seconded by Sam Stivers, and added to the omnibus vote at the end of the meeting.

I. New Business

Mr. Romero raised two topics. First, he discussed MWRA's planned improvements at Shaft L, sized to accommodate future system expansion for MetroWest communities. He posed two questions for staff to address: the cost difference for this change in scope and whether future expansion costs would be recovered from new system entrants. The Executive Committee agreed with the importance of these questions and supported further investigation.

Second, Mr. Romero mentioned the new National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) general permit for stormwater discharges, which could impact municipalities and private entities with large impervious surfaces. He highlighted MWRA's effort to clarify definitions within the permit and encouraged municipalities to provide feedback. Mr. Sullivan confirmed MWRA's legal leads on the issue, Carolyn Francisco Murphy and Michael Altieri, and offered to share Boston's comments with them.

J. Omnibus and Adjournment

A motion to adjourn was put forth. It was moved by Maurice Handel, seconded by Sam Stivers, and added to the omnibus roll call vote.

A motion to take an omnibus roll call vote was put forth. It was moved by Maurice Handel and seconded by Sam Stivers.

An omnibus vote took place on the following items:

- Approval of the January 16, 2025 Advisory Board meeting agenda.





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- Approval of the Executive Committee meeting minutes from November 14, 2024.
- Adjournment of the meeting

The roll call vote was as follows:

Name	Community	Vote
Michael Rademacher	Arlington	Yes (remote)
John Sullivan	Boston (BWSC)	Yes (remote)
David Pavlik	Lexington	Yes (remote)
Nicholas Rystrom	Revere	Yes (remote)
Richard Raiche	Somerville	Yes (in person)
Sam Stivers	Southborough	Yes (in person)
John P. DeAmicis	Stoneham	Yes (in person)
Maurice Handel	MAPC	Yes (in person)

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "David Manugian".

David Manugian, Advisory Board Secretary

These minutes reflect the discussion of the meeting. The Advisory Board maintains audio recordings of Executive Committee meetings that are available upon request.

