

Support for Substitute SB 422

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An Act Concerning Residential Water Rates, Public Drinking Water Supply Emergencies and the Sellers of Bottled Water

Dear Planning and Development Committee,

I am here to affirm the need for Substitute SB 422 and urge the Connecticut State Legislature's Planning and Development Committee to expedite its adoption.

We need this bill, not only to establish ground rules for fair pricing of a valuable natural resource, but also to protect the future of our state's access to plentiful fresh water. And the only way to do that is to place some limitations on what has been, until now, a virtually unrestrained ability of the quasi-autonomous Metropolitan District Commission to function outside of normal governmental accountability. For too long, the MDC has hidden behind a wall of exclusivity and privacy, pretending that its 1929 charter absolves it of any responsibility to answer to the public. Small wonder it vigorously opposes the bill before us. They know that even these modest, proposed regulations governing discounting policy and allocation in times of drought would be a slippery slope of outside management.

For once, they are right. That's why their well-paid crew of publicists and managers is circulating through the Legislative Office Building, equipped with glossy brochures and reassuring forecasts. But those forecasts are unreliable since they are based on data well over a decade old that take no account of climate change. They misconstrue the water they handle as some sort of free gift that they can sell off, as if there were no consequences environmentally in doing so – and no alternative uses for that water. Like recharging our depleted river basins and lakes.

We're sympathetic to their plight. MDC needs to generate revenue for an upgraded water distribution and discharge system. But this deal with Niagara Bottling is not a model for how to go about making rational, financially responsible water policy. It favors large, inefficient users over conservers. It contributes to an ecologically disastrous waste of unrecycled plastic containers that clog our surface waterways and destroy fish and birdlife. And it emerges from a decisions made behind a veil of secrecy whereby the only token of MDC accountability – a citizens advisory board – has been abandoned. So the MDC towns were left out of the policy-making process and kept from being informed. Nor were the neighboring towns informed about the impending deal.

You will hear much hand wringing from the business community that regulating MDC policy would set a bad precedent that's not business friendly to large water users.

The point of this legislation is not to handicap business, and that won't be its impact. The point of this bill is to set standards for wise usage of a precious natural resource and to set reasonable expectations by which the business community can plan for ecologically sound production. Connecticut's future does not reside in some misty-eyed reclamation of its old, nostalgia-laden mass industrial past. Connecticut's future resides in clean energy, efficient production, innovation technology, and an environment in which good neighbors and good stewards of the outdoors are rewarded for their ingenuity.

This can't be achieved on the basis of an outdated delegation of power to an independent utility, one that pretends it's the 170th municipality of the State of Connecticut but that, unlike all the other townships, does not answer to voters or to an elected council. If the MDC wants to be treated like a municipality it must be held accountable to the entire citizenry affected by its decisions on a statewide, not just a regional, basis. And if Connecticut is ever to develop a coherent, comprehensive strategy for management of its water, it cannot allow independent fiefdoms to rule over the most basic, the most precious natural resource the state has.

SB422 is a step in the right direction.