

REPRESENTATIVE POLICY BOARD
CONSUMER AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

JANUARY 26, 2026

MEETING TRANSCRIPTION

Naomi:

We'll start with the safety moment. Our safety moment for this month is, "Be prepared for winter driving." There are some tips below that tell you be careful in the snow. Sleet, and ice can lead to hazardous road conditions. So just have your vehicle ready for this type of weather. And a couple of things you could check are your brakes; make sure you have anything that you need in your car, like a shovel, jumper cables, toolkits; and always carry a blanket and first aid. Okay? The rest is there for you to see.

Jennifer, are there any public ... Anybody from the public on?

Jennifer:

No.

Naomi:

Okay. We'll move on to the third item. May I get an approval of the minutes for December 15th meeting?

Bob:

So moved.

Naomi:

Second-

Charles:

Second, Charles.

Naomi:

Second. Okay. You have heard the-

Charles:

[inaudible 00:01:36].

Naomi:

Okay. It has been moved and second. Are you ready for the question? All those that are in favor, please say aye.

All:

Aye.

Naomi:

Those that are opposed? Anybody who wants to abstain?

Hearing none, seeing none on this motion, I declare it.

Prem, are you on?

Prem:

I'm right here.

Naomi:

Okay. We're ready for you, Prem.

Prem:

Thank you.

Good evening, everyone. So for today's special topic, we thought it's a good idea to spend a few minutes on our customer assistance program update.

So just a refresher, going back a little bit in time, we actually have two types of programs that we have in place for customer assistance. As you know, one of the four programs is called the Dollar Energy Program, which is basically our internal program self-funded by RWA to help our customers.

And then the second program, if you remember, we had a LIHWAP program. I think this was part of the ARPA Act, back in 2020. We actually had LIHWAP program, this was administered by the Department of Social Services back in time. They had up to \$1,000. They gave assistance to low-income household water customers. And basically, that program is currently being halted.

But just as a little bit of a history, we actually had our RWA customers being helped in the program, the LIHWAP program. We actually did over a million dollars worth of assistance during the time. But unfortunately, now that's on hold. As you know, stuff happening with the federal government. But there is actually a bill that was being actively worked on, and we are working with AMWA. 4733, I think it's called, the bill for trying to reinstitute the LIHWAP program permanently. I know why, it's probably in the details here, so I'm just going over. You can read this in your leisure.

But I think one of the key things, as you know, since the LIHWAP program is kind of in the halt. One of the things that came about, this is sometime last year ... Jay actually, this came from Jay's request, and then Hank Arless with Naomi on what else we can do to help our customers in the past. The Dollar Energy Program was kind of the prime program that we have in play as of today.

So one of the things we did was as a team, we looked into comparing the program that we have. So just to give a little bit of a highlight, the current program that we have helps the customers up to \$175 in terms of assistance. And we had a whole federal poverty level that we looked at. It was 250%, and anybody who's under that level. So what that really means is, I know it doesn't say in here, for federal poverty level of 250% at a high level, it means you're looking at people, customers making 53K in average salary for a two people household income. And that level, if anybody makes under that, we used to give them \$175 credit.

Bridget, who's our customer care director, who's also here, she does a fabulous job and a team trying to help our customers. As you know, some of these things take a lot of paperwork, but we have helped the

customers. They just had to call us and then we take them through the process, we do all the paperwork for them, et cetera.

So what we did now, so basically fast forwarding to what we are trying to do now, we looked at comparing the state median income and kind of looking at what others are doing in our state. For example, we looked at MDC, we looked at Aquarian Water, we looked at Connecticut Water, and we kind of benchmarked to see how we could improve this program a little bit better for our customers. Again, one thing, again, I'll underscore is that this is a self-driven program. It's not supported by the state or federal or anything of the such, but others might have some of those things.

So we reconsidered in terms of the criteria and we wanted to help our customers in giving them a little bit more eligibility, as you know, based on the income levels, as you see and the inflation, everything else that's going on.

We kind of compared on what would be a better eligibility criteria. So what you see here on the screen, I mean, just to give you a little bit of insight for customers who have state median income, again, this is for two people household as a point of reference. So anybody who's between 61% to 75% within that. So what that means in terms of numbers, basically if you remember, I mentioned about the 53K for the federal poverty level, this one is you can look at \$78,076 to be precise. Anybody who's making under that level would get up to a \$225. So we improve that a little bit better for the customers, so they'll get a \$225 grant. So if you think about an average customer, the bills that they have, they could probably get by five to six months of water coverage if they are, again, they're eligible and the criteria matches up.

And then we also looked at in the second tier where we are making even better for the customers. So anybody who's making \$62,460 to be precise. I pulled up these numbers, by the way, from our Connecticut state rate and in terms of the state median income. So anybody who's making under that would get a little bit better. So we went up to \$300 in terms of grants, which will really help our customers.

So again, the idea is to really try and see how much better we could do in terms of customer assistance, especially now that we don't have the LIHWAP program in place. So we are trying to really improve upon that.

So that's like a very high level what I wanted to share with the team. So we are going from \$175 to \$225 for certain income group and then up to \$300 for even more lower income group for our customers.

That's the highlight in here for the Dollar Energy Program. So that's all I wanted to share. I don't know if there's any questions from the team for myself or Bridget. I know Rochelle is also here. She can answer any questions that you may have. I just want to thank the consumer affairs team and the authority, the RPB here, and also OCA. Also had a chat with Jeff about this program just to make sure that we are trying to do better for our customers. So I'll leave it there. Thank you for the time and any questions for me or Bridget at this time?

Stephen:

Hey, Prem, this is Steve. If no one else has a question. Not opposed to the idea here, but this is rate payer money that's funding this, correct?

Prem:

Yeah.

Stephen:

How do other utilities fund this?

Prem:

So I think some of the, for example, if you look at Connecticut Water or MDC, may be a better example, their programs are funded through some of the state generative funds or even the things that they try to find. And they also have other mechanisms that they have. Again, I can't speak to every other mechanism that they have in place, like similar to ours here. We look at self-generated funds that we have that we use.

So it's a combination, Steve. So it's not a perfect cookie cutter depending on who you see. MDC actually has a combination of state and also their own funds, and again, rate payer money as well versus Connecticut Water, I think when we had leave up in place, because that was a program that was held by the federal, so it was different. It came from there versus many of these programs are mostly self-generated, so hopefully that helps.

Stephen:

But are we getting any other funds at the RWA or is it just RWA?

Bridgette:

For Dollar Energy, it's just RWA. For LIHWAP, it was 100% funded through federal funds. And hopefully that will, as Prem mentioned, there's a pending bill and hopefully that will get reauthorized because that was very helpful to our customers who are struggling to pay their bill.

Stephen:

Yeah, I appreciate that. But I remember the gas company used to ask if you wanted to donate to their program, something.

Bridgette:

A dollar.

Stephen:

Maybe our customers should be aware of this.

Prem:

Yeah, no, I think in terms of communication, Steve, we are trying to also beef up some of the communication plan. We're trying to do some press release, like today when a customer calls in, we offer this by default for any customers who are eligible, Bridgett's team takes care of that. But you're right, I think there are some, especially I've seen with United Media Company and the gas companies, they do have program where customers, some customers also do some donation and things of the sort. We don't collect donations like that if that's where you're going with this thing. But like I said, there's more education on how to support our customers. And then our purview is that, again, to Rochelle's point, this is RWA's self-generative funds. It's not anything from a state or a federal at this point. But I think we can try and see if there are opportunities, if that's where you're going with it.

Stephen:

Yeah, absolutely. And what's the total on this? How much money is the...

Prem:

So the way I see it is, just as an example, we had around 163 applications that this is looked at as a calendar year in 2025. So give or take you're looking at around 28K that was actually given to the customers if you look at sheer numbers of the applicants, but we do want to see, because of the improved eligibility criteria we have now, we wanted to make sure we look at the numbers going. So we gave ourselves some room. So it's up to \$50,000 now for this year.

But then again, that's not set in stone. So if we see more applicants coming in and they're trying to get some support, then we want to make sure we support the customers. So we want to test it out, if you will. But right now, like last year, like I said, it was around \$28,500. So this year we have raised the cap at \$50 and we want to see and monitor this.

So we are already informed Dollar Energy as well. So the team has a close control on this thing, watching these things. Yeah.

Bridgette:

I would just add, Steve, it's very unlikely that it will be \$50,000 just based on still what the qualifications are and what we've seen in the past. And we do have monies available already with Dollar Energy that we're currently using to fund the program.

Stephen:

Okay. Thank you.

Greg:

Prem, this is Greg Malloy. What percent of the people who have applied are actually seniors?

Prem:

That's a great question, Greg. And I'll be honest with you, I don't have the information in front of me right now, but we can check on that.

Bridgette:

They don't track... Hi, generally that information. We could ask and see if they'd want to tell us, but it is not something that's tracked generally when doing the assistance programs because it's based on need and it's not there's not an age, but it would be nice, especially when they tend to generally have more of a fixed income.

Greg:

Right, right. That's what I'm thinking.

Prem:

I think if I'm not wrong, even this whole request or the looking into the program also, I don't know if Jeff remembers that time where one of the elderly customer was looking for some assistance and we helped

that customer at that time. I'm talking many months ago. But that was one of the triggers to see what else we can do here and we try to look and revamp this program.

But that being said, to Bridget's point, I'm not sure if that's something that's tracked. Bridget, you may be right. And we don't know that information at this point in terms of the age.

Greg:

Okay. Thank you.

Naomi:

Okay. Does anybody else have any questions for Prem and his team?

Okay. Hearing none, we're going to move on to the next item on the agenda, and that would be the approval of the OCA's budget for 2027.

Jeff, are you on?

Jeff:

I am here.

Naomi:

Okay.

Jeff:

So the OCA's budget discussion is usually very short, but this year it's going to be a little bit longer.

When I was appointed as the OCA back in 2008, I was told that the OCA, pursuant to the enabling legislation, has jurisdiction to intervene in any matter of interest to consumers, and therefore there really is not a budget for the OCA. With that in mind, any organization needs to be able to budget and plan for expenditures, especially when you're talking about rate payer public money.

So the budget that was utilized at the time that I became OCA was \$50,000, and I went along with that for many years. And as you know, we've never actually expended the full amount.

A few years back, we added \$10,000 to the budget, increasing it to \$60,000 so that the OCA would have a placeholder for hiring consultants. Over the years, the OCAs hired consultants on a few occasions.

Back when the legacy customer information system was replaced with SAP, for example, I hired a consultant because that was something that was outside of my experience, outside of my skillset.

When the authority looked to make an investment, a non-core investment in an aquaponics business, I engaged Dr. Michael Timmons, who runs the School of Agriculture at Cornell University and is a preeminent expert on hydroponics and aquaponics as a consultant. Again, something outside of my expertise. And then in the current CAS replacement project, I once again went out and hired consultants because that area is outside of my expertise.

The OCA, as many of you, probably all of you know, is engaged in the private practice of law and has been going on 36 years now. The OCA's primary practice areas consist of construction law, municipal law, business law, and commercial litigation. So the OCA has skillsets that are developed in the private practice of law that in many cases intersect with the work that the OCA does for the consumers of the Regional Water Authority.

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For example, last Thursday night, we had a public hearing on an application by the authority to the RPB to replace on Route 80 in New Haven a control valve, a gate valve. The OCAs had experience representing contractors that install control valves. The OCA sits on the board of directors of one of the largest construction companies of the state of Connecticut and is familiar with certain types of construction activity, including subsurface construction. So we don't need to hire consultants. And for the benefit of the consumer, we don't feel the need to pad our hours or go out and spend rate payer money on consultants.

So that's a long-winded way of saying that no change to the OCA budget. In the event that the pending blue drop transaction happens, then there'll be a budget that is developed consistent with the needs of the Aquarion consumers. But until such time, the OCA believes that the standing budget is more than adequate to serve the needs of the consumers.

Thank you.

Naomi:

Thank you, Jeff. Anybody have anything for Jeff? Okay.

Stephen:

This is Steve. Jeff, we normally anticipate the things that you routinely do. So what portion of the \$50,000 does that generally come to each year? Do you spend \$25, 30, 40? Do you know?

Jeff:

The majority ... Oh, you mean how much is spent in a typical year?

Stephen:

Yeah. I mean, just for your basic services to review the projects and things without consultants.

Jeff:

Oh, without consultants. Well, it's typically...

Stephen:

So we have, what, \$2,000 a month here generally made sometimes four?

Jeff:

No, it's typically \$35, \$40,000 a year.

Stephen:

Okay. So most of it is really set to cover that. And we could, if we approve... Any consultants that we might need that were unexpected, because as you say, you really have the ability to engage anyone that you think is appropriate.

Jeff:

Correct.

Stephen:

Okay.

Jjaser:

Hey, Jeff, you must have put more time in this year with the foreclosed acquisition?

Jeff:

No, last fiscal year, the application was a heavy lift. Last fiscal year, there was more time. The OCA also doesn't bill all of the time that he spends reviewing things. Many times when the OCA is on the elliptical in the morning and the OCA, as he gets older, finds it more difficult to get a good 60-minute workout in. The OCA will read pleadings that are filed in cases, not just involving the RWA, but other clients. And the OCA will, with respect to the RWA for a good, I would say, nine months, go on the PRO website and read late filed exhibits, interrogatories, and responses and briefs. And the OCA doesn't feel the need to bill the consumer for every single thing that the OCA does.

This has always been my practice with regard to my municipal clients. My practice is 60% private sector, 40% public sector, if you include the RWA in there.

And the clients in the private sector pay a premium rate and clients in the public sector pay a discounted rate. I don't have a need to bill for everything that I do. So a lot of the time that I spend in a typical year researching and becoming familiar with different types of issues that impact applications does not get billed and does not need to be billed. It comes with the territory.

Bob:

Very good. Thank you.

Jjaser:

Sure.

Naomi:

Anything else for Jeff?

Okay. Moving on to the next item, which will be item number seven...

Jeff:

You have to vote on this, don't we?

Naomi:

Oh, do we need to vote on this? I'm sorry.

Stephen:

Sure.

Jeff:

Or is this approved by the budget when we do the budget?

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Naomi:

When we do the budget.

Jennifer:

I think the committee has voted before.

Stephen:

Yes.

Naomi:

Okay. May I have a motion to accept Jeff's report coming from the OCA?

Stephen:

So moved.

Naomi:

Can I get a second? Second.

Jennifer:

Second.

Naomi:

Okay. It has been moved and second. Ready for the questions?

All those that are in favor, please say aye or show a sign of voting.

All:

Aye.

Naomi:

Those that are opposed have the same right.

Seeing none hearing on it's a motion and I declare it.

Okay. Moving on to the next item, which would be the approval of the OCA's invoice for December in the amount of \$2,121.

Stephen:

So moved.

What about Jeff's report?

Naomi:

Oh, I skipped right over it. Sorry, could we just stay on this while I'm already here then?

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Jennifer:

Yep.

Naomi:

Sorry. I moved right over it.

Can I get a second?

Jennifer:

Second.

Stephen:

I'll second it.

Naomi:

Okay. Ready for the questions? Questions? Questions? Questions? All those that are in favor show the sign of voting.

All:

Aye.

Naomi:

Those that are opposed have the same right, seeing none hearing none. It's a vote and I declare it.

Okay. I'm sorry. Back to item number six. Jeff, could we have your report please?

Jeff:

Sure. Thank you. We don't have any current consumer complaints. There is one complaint that I reported on previously as having been resolved as far as the OCA's concerned that had a loose end and that involved a customer, a business customer, commercial customer in Milford who wanted a hydrant removed, if you recall. And the hydrant was in fact removed and it was signed off on by the City of Milford Fire Marshal as not being necessary for fire protection purposes. And the customer also had previously been looking for a significant refund.

The authority, my recommendation to the authority was to go and work with the customer directly to resolve any outstanding concern that the customer may have had. And I received an email late last week from the authority that it was successful in resolving the matter to the customer's satisfaction. There was a small credit that was provided, but nothing material, nothing substantial.

So that matter was in fact fully resolved, a little bit of an unusual matter. No pending escalations, no pending consumer matters. As you know, you heard my testimony last Thursday on the Route 80 control valve project. And you also heard during the authority's report, management's report, that there's an issuance test rate application that's on its way to us. So that'll be something that the OCA will obviously turn his attention to once received. Thank you.

Naomi:

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Okay.

Jeff:

Thank you.

Naomi:

Thank you. Okay. Any new business?

Okay. Hearing none.

I just want to remind everyone about, Jennifer did send out an email to everyone letting you know that there's going to be dates in February and March to come out and see our new system, the CSI system. Please, if you're not going to come, let her know either way. And if you are coming, please choose one of the dates, send it back to her so she could get the schedule ready. Okay?

Our next meeting will be held on Monday, February 16th at 5:30 PM, and that would be on hybrid, hopefully.

Any other questions, concerns, matters?

Okay. Meeting is adjourned. I want to thank everybody for coming. Continue to stay safe.