

Irmo Town Hall Meeting

6 pm, Jan 31, 2020

Subject: Blue Granite, formerly Carolina Utilities, Sewer Rate Increase from to \$65.08 to \$101 (56% rate increase).

Staff present: Blue Granite representatives, Department of Consumer Affairs, Public Service Commission (chair), Office of Regulatory Staff; and lawyer representing consumers

Others present: Sen Ray Cromer, Dick Harpootlian, Nathan Ballentine, Chip Huggins, Irmo mayor and Town of Irmo representatives, and Jake Moore, Irmo town lawyer.

Summary: About 150+ people attended the meeting, and approximately 32+ citizens who spoke for three minutes each. Everyone spoke against the Blue Granite rate raise; many speakers were applauded for their honesty. Speakers were sworn in before testifying. Blue Granite representatives did not respond to any of the speakers. Meeting was orderly, but attendees were all against to the rate increases.

Sample comments from respondees:

- Rate hike every year? What is to stop further increases?
- Company mismanagement. "We are stuck," have to pay outrageous price for bad service.
- Many complained of problems (dirty water from faucets, overflow of sewage, water rates were lower than sewage rates (3x higher), no response from company, unanswered calls to company.
- Is name change from Carolina Water to Blue Granite an excuse to declare bankruptcy?
- Blue Granite wants to move to Greenville to a new office. Rate hike to cover move, new furniture, TV, and legal fees because of past legal failures.
- Present sewer rates NOT tied to water rates as in other municipalities.
- "Outrageous rates," company is passing their high costs to consumers.
- Company is incompetent. No responsive, no followups for service, customer relations "bad".
- This is a bailout of the company by the consumer; we should not have to pay for your mistakes.
- Several citizens complained of increasing costs to elderly, single parents with no real service.
- Why not use quarterly billing as in other communities?
- We would like a decrease in billing as residents are not getting what they pay for now.
- What are the bonuses for Blue Granite top executives?
- Blue Granite is pumping sewage directly to Columbia, not processing its own sewage.
- Is there a fund to help poor and needy who cannot afford present/proposed rates?
- One speaker traced the four for-profit corporations above Blue Granite to an organization in British Columbia.
- Many residents complained of present water quality; they have to purchase bottled water because of taste and dirt in water. Repetitive complaints to Blue Water often result in no action, no followup.
- Several residents are considering moving from the Irmo area because of increasing sewer rates and really poor service from the company. Residents on fixed incomes are hurting; have to choose between sewage bill and food, medicine, and rent.
- Blue Granite wants a 10.7% return for their investors. This angered the meeting participants, especially because of the present and proposed sewage fees. 10.7% return is unreasonable
- Two speakers also addressed the fact that the Public Service Commission had approved previous higher rate changes with very little improvement in sewage infrastructure and that they failed to follow due diligence in overseeing the company's failures (sewage dumping in Saluda River, very little improvements, mismanagement).
- **Personal observation:** Meeting participants had valid reason to be hostile to Blue Granite. We thought more would really be angry but all had some really terrible experiences with the company and were pleading with the Public Service Commission for help. Our opinion is this company does not deserve a permit to conduct business.

Pat and Dave Campbell

Copy furnished: Brad Everhart, Joan Sneed, Bill Malinowski, Nathan Ballentine