

Monday, December 2, 2024

[Listen to the Article](#)

Sponsors, Supporters Hope Bicameral Water Affordability Bill Package Will Be A Priority During Lame Duck Session

Backers of a bicameral legislative package that would create a water rate affordability fund and prevent water shutoffs for residents with health issues on Monday urged their colleagues to make the bills a priority during lame duck.

The House and Senate this time last year took testimony on separate versions of the bills ([HB 5088](#) , [HB 5089](#) , [HB 5090](#) , [HB 5091](#) , [HB 5092](#) , [HB 5093](#) , [SB 549](#) , [SB 550](#) , [SB 551](#) , [SB 552](#) and [SB 553](#)) which would create a Low-Income Water Residential Affordability Program that would be funded through a \$2 monthly fee per retail water meter. The fund would be overseen by the Department of Treasury. Local officials also threw their support behind [SB 25](#) , which would create a right to water.

Throughout the process, supporters have said the bills are a way to prevent water shutoffs and help residents in need, while opponents said the proposal is an unfair tax on Michigan families to bail out those not paying their bills (See [Gongwer Michigan Report, May 8, 2024](#)).

On Monday, [Sen. Stephanie Chang](#) (D-Detroit), [Sen. John Damoose](#) (R-Harbor Springs) and [Rep. Abraham Aiyash](#) (D-Hamtramck) held a news conference to nudge their colleagues in both chambers to action during lame duck.

"Water affordability must be a priority for this lame duck session because we recognize how important it is that we get this bipartisan, commonsense solution passed for the good of all Michiganders, but also because we recognize that we if we don't pass this in a few years, we will very much be in a crisis," Chang said. "We recognize that water

bills are continuing to go up, and we have not passed any long-term solutions on this issue. While we have appropriated money, which has been very helpful, we know that the problem is only growing, and so it's very, very important for all of the community members that absolutely need this legislation that we pass this before the end of the year."

Aiyash also said the package was a lame duck priority on the House side.

"We look forward to passing it this December," Aiyash added. "There's been a lot of healthy discussions with members of both caucuses, and I think there's an appetite to get this done before we leave for the new year."

Damoose said he's had great conversations on the package with his Republican colleagues in both chambers, including the House. He also questioned why it took so long for the bills to get momentum and why it had to wait for lame duck to see action.

"This is something that really didn't have to wait until lame duck," he said. "I don't know why we didn't get this done earlier. So, now it's just a matter of timing to me. Let's not waste any more time and let it get it done."

Overall, Chang said the package would ensure clean and affordable water for every Michigander.

"Water is not just a resource, it's something that every human being needs in order to live. Yet too many families in our state are struggling to afford their water bills or have, in the past, faced the threat of shut offs," she said. "This bill package represents years of hard work and collaboration with water providers, advocate governments, community organizations and many across the state. The goal is simple to ensure that no family has to choose between paying their water bill, keeping the lights and heat on or putting food on the table."

The legislation, if passed, would make water bills affordable to low-income households at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. They would establish a sustainable funding source and provide critical shut off protections.

Chang said it was a sad fact that in 2020, more than 317,000 Michigan households were behind on their water bills.

"That's a lot of our friends and neighbors potentially at risk of losing access to something that's essential for life," she added. "Post inflation only has increased prices and pressures on Michigan's working class and vulnerable families. This is an issue that affects families in urban, suburban and rural communities alike in every single county in Michigan, and our legislation addresses these challenges head on, protecting public health, all while investing in our local water providers and water infrastructure to help stabilize their rising costs."

Several changes were made to the bills via substitutes during and after committees held testimony on the bills last year. The legislative package's sponsors created a website – miwaterplan.com – to track [changes](#) in the bills, which Chang said were lengthy and only gave an overview of changes during the press conference.

Damoose said he was proud to be a supporter of the package.

"Clean affordable water is something we all depend on, and it's time we come together to ensure that every Michigander has access to it. Florida has beautiful winters, Colorado has amazing mountains, and Michigan has water," Damoose said. "And the thought that some of our residents cannot afford access to that water is something that should be appalling to every legislator, Republican or Democrat. This bill package isn't just about addressing water affordability. It's about doing so in a way that makes fiscal sense."

By capping water bills at 2 to 3 percent of income for low-income households and by creating a sustainable funding source, Damoose said the Legislature was making an investment "that will definitely pay off in the long run."

"Helping families pay their bills reduces bad debt, strengthens utility ledgers and helps prevent costly public health crises down the road," he said. "Some people might be hesitant about the \$2 monthly fee, but let me be clear, this small investment will generate \$65 million annually, funds that will directly benefit families and communities across our state and the utilities that provide them with clean water, and as we've seen, the cost of our inaction is far greater."

Aside from the package being a fiscally smart solution to a growing crisis, Damoose framed it as a moral imperative for lawmakers of all stripes.

"We have a conscience, too," Damoose said of legislative Republicans. "We want to do the right thing."

[Back to top](#)



Copyright 2024, Gongwer News Service, Inc. All rights reserved.

[Terms of Service](#) [Privacy Policy](#)

