

## POLITICS & BUSINESS

# 21 groups oppose task force's recommendation for regional water authority



by Aliza Worthington

December 15, 2023



Bloede Dam. Photo from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on Flickr. (Public Domain)

A task force's recommendation for a regional water authority is drawing criticism from a group of community,

labor, environmental, and social justice organizations.

While the Baltimore Water Regional Governance Task Force recommends a regional authority in its draft report, **21 organizations are demanding** the Task Force reject that approach. Instead, they ask that city and state elected officials protect local control of the \$5.5 billion water and sewer system, which is the city's largest asset.

The organizations opposed to the Task Force's recommendation include CASA, City Union of Baltimore, Food and Water Watch, AFT-Maryland, Jews United for Justice, Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service, NAACP Legal Defense Fund (LDF), among others.

The draft report suggests control of the water and sewer system be transferred to a new authority board, whose members would be appointed by Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and the governor, even though task force members expressed concern with this approach.

The groups' concerns involved "major unsolved challenges associated with an authority, including refinancing existing debt at a cost of hundreds of millions of dollars, transferring the workforce and worker pensions, and overturning Baltimore City's charter provision that bans water privatization," according to the press release announcing the groups' opposition.

"At a time when our city is working hard for local control of our schools and police, it is alarming and outrageous that we face the prospect of losing local control of our essential water services," said Mary Grant, director of the Public Water for All Campaign at Food & Water Watch. "The draft recommendation punts every single substantial issue — from worker pensions to water affordability to debt refinancing — to a transition period to a regional authority, but that information is critical to determine the viability of an authority in the first place. The task force must reject this preposterous and baseless recommendation, and instead move forward with improving the intermunicipal agreements to ensure safe, affordable, publicly controlled water for all."

The groups' opposition to the cost, an estimated \$1.7 to \$2.5 billion, comes from what they call the Task Force's "baseless assumptions and vague arguments about greater economies of scale," saying "consultants have provided no data or evidence to substantiate any of their claims. In fact, experience from other cities that have undergone such a transition directly counter their assumptions." They cite academic studies that show authorities charge higher rates than municipal water departments.

As an example, the Task Force's recommendation relies on consultants' claim that a regional authority would improve worker retention. Those opposed point to similar transitions in other cities, like Detroit, where **nearly 15 percent of the workforce** was lost during the transition to the Great Lakes Water Authority.

Other concerns, based on case studies from Detroit and Tampa Bay, involve a regional authority leading to mass water shutoffs, water privatization, and the loss of thousands of union jobs within city and county government.

The groups are also critical of the Task Force not having conducted a racial and economic equity assessment of a regional water authority. The Task Force argued that it would be addressed during the transition.

“The Task Force should conduct a racial equity impact assessment and an economic equity impact assessment on a regional authority model before recommending the model for future legislation,” said David Wheaton, economic justice policy fellow for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (LDF). “Efforts to regionalize water systems in other jurisdictions such as Detroit have **hurt Black communities**. Baltimore is already working to address a water affordability crisis which has had a disproportionate and detrimental impact on the **City’s Black neighborhoods**. Hastily rushing to establish a new governance model without doing critical analyses on how a new model will affect Black residents and low-income ratepayers risks undermining this progress and creating even greater disparities.”

In their Dec. 15 letter, the groups also express concern that the process is being rushed. The public comment period on the draft report extends only until Jan. 5, 2024, a period they claim leaves very little time for the public to review and provide feedback given the holiday season.

“As a better solution for our regional challenges, we urge you to recommend improving the intermunicipal agreements and establishing a City-County Water Committee. A formal coordinated effort between the city and county should improve how we invest in and maintain our water and wastewater system, based on racial and economic equity analyses and updated cost models, and it should establish a long-term strategy to ensure safe, clean, and affordable water and wastewater services for the region,” concludes the letter from the 21 groups.