A RESOLUTION

23-450

IN THE COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

July 7, 2020

To declare the sense of the Council that Congress should enact and fund a national water affordability program, modeled on the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program for home heating assistance for low-income families as a component of federal COVID-19 relief.

RESOLVED, BY THE COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, That this resolution may be cited as the “Sense of the Council for Supporting Congressional Approval of a Federal Sustainable Water Affordability Program Resolution of 2020”.

Sec. 2. The Council finds that:

(1) In May 2020, the Council advocated that DC Water, one of the largest municipal water filtration systems in the United States, which serves the metropolitan Washington, D.C. region, continue to provide District residential customers with full service regardless of whether they have current or delinquent accounts. This includes reconnecting all occupied residential properties with water service, which is strategic to addressing the personal hygiene needs and health emergency requirements associated with the deadly impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

(2) The need for a subsidy to support long-term, sustainable, and affordable access to water and sewerage services will have enormous benefits toward the health of all who reside in the District. A subsidy will be particularly beneficial to household members engaged in service and hospitality trades, many of whom have lower incomes. As essential everyday workers, these workers have the greatest medical risks, which frequently lead to serious illness or death due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Accessing municipal water service must be addressed with urgency through a national holistic solution of new policies that remove unaffordability for financially challenged residents and small residential property owners and offer access to clean affordable water service. The problem of unaffordability requires a permanent solution to maintain the public health of the community.

(3) Congress should create and adequately fund a national water rates subsidy program similar to the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (“LIHEAP”) within the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.

(4) LIHEAP receives and expends approximately $3.5 billion annually to support
gas and electric heating utility costs for low-income residents throughout the United States.

(5) Based on the same realities that led the federal government to recognize the need to support low-income families by subsidizing energy, it is time to also provide a robust federal subsidy for the precious resource of clean and safe drinking water.

(6) As the high cost of providing clean and safe drinking water, which is experiencing an alarming rise in retail rates across the country, adversely affects municipalities’ ability to provide free or subsidized water, the federal government is the proper entity to fund necessary water subsidies for low-income families, as demonstrated by the popular and successful LIHEAP.

(7) Affordable water is a health and safety issue that is implicitly recognized not only by the recent reconnection of water services to aid in the mitigation of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also by the existence of LIHEAP for low-income electric and gas home heating. Water also needs to be recognized and supported for our most vulnerable residents as a utility that is directly tied to the support of life.

(8) Congress is presently deliberating another one or more tranches of relief funding for expenses related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The funding of water and sewer infrastructure should be included as a public health benefit.

Sec. 3. It is the sense of the Council that Congress should enact and fund a national water affordability program, modeled on LIHEAP for home heating assistance for low-income families, and that significant and adequate funding for a national water affordability program benefiting low-income water customers and public health should be an urgent, primary focus of congressional COVID-19 pandemic relief funding.

Sec. 4. The Council shall transmit a copy of this resolution to Mayor Muriel Bowser, Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, Representatives Nancy Pelosi and Kevin McCarthy, Senators Mitch McConnell and Charles Schumer, and Tommy Wells, Chair of the DC Water Board of Directors.

Sec. 5. This resolution shall take effect immediately upon the first date of publication in the District of Columbia Register.