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Privatization of public water, sewer systems could be fast-tracked under N.J. bill

By Seth Augenstein | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com



The backwash pumps at the Newark Watershed facility in West Milford are shown in this 2012 file photo. Such publicly-owned water systems could be sold to private companies without a referendum, under a bill pending before the state senate. (Star-Ledger file photo)

TRENTON — Public water systems could be sold to private companies without a public vote, under a bill approved today by the state Assembly.

The Water Infrastructure Protection Act was approved today, 45-24, with six abstentions. A state Senate version is pending.

The bill's sponsor, Assemblyman Lou Greenwald (D-Camden), offered the bill without comment to the rest of the body before the vote.

Proponents of the bill have said fast-tracking the sale of public water systems would get needed investment into aging infrastructure. State Sen. Paul Sarlo (D-Bergen), one of the sponsors, offered amendments earlier this month which he said "overhaul" the legislation, effectively narrowing the definition of what systems would qualify.

However, opponents including the state's Division of Rate Counsel, the New Jersey Sierra Club and other environmental groups, the New Jersey Business and Industry Association, the Communications Workers of America union, and the New Jersey State League of Municipalities were all united in their opposition at an Assembly committee hearing last week.

"It really has a single intention: to bypass voter intent," said Adam Liebtag, the CWA president, at the hearing.