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Water privatization bill removing public vote requirement moves to Christie's desk

By Seth Augenstein | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com



Sales of public water systems to private companies would be fast-tracked under a bill, approved by the Assembly and State Senate this week and now headed to the governor's desk. (AFP/Getty Images)

A bill fast-tracking sale of public water systems into private hands was approved by the state Senate on Thursday, and will now head to Gov. Chris Christie's desk.

About an hour of debate preceded the vote on the Water Infrastructure Protection Act, which was approved 21-16 and would allow local governments to sell public water systems without a referendum, as is now required by law.

"This is such a bad deal for the citizens of New Jersey," said State Sen. Bob Smith (D-Middlesex). "This is crazy... just giving away our water supply."

"Put the rhetoric to one side," said State Sen. Joe Kyrillos (R-Monmouth), one of the sponsors. "This does not force anyone to sell water utilities."

The bill, which was introduced in September, drew opposition from a wide variety of groups, including the New Jersey State League of Municipalities, the New Jersey Business and Industry Association, environmental groups like the Sierra Club and Food and Water Watch, and the Communications Workers of America union. The state's Division of Rate Counsel blasted the bill publicly, saying ratepayers would end up paying for the sale of their own water systems, with the way infrastructure sales are legally regulated.

Proponents said the bill would get private investment into public infrastructure which has gone neglected for years.

It was passed by the Assembly on Monday, 45-24, with six abstentions.

If signed by Christie, the bill would allow public entities to sell their water infrastructure to private companies if certain conditions are proved, including whether a system is losing water or has salt intrusion. State Sen. Paul Sarlo (D-Bergen), another of the sponsors, unveiled an amendment to the bill earlier this month which he said narrowed the scope of which systems could be sold without a public vote.

"Today the Senate sold out New Jersey's water supply," said Jeff Tittel, the director of the New Jersey chapter of the Sierra Club. "This bill is undemocratic, takes away public oversight and input, and allows deregulation of our water protection and rates."