

Water Accountability & Equity Act Modifications - CB 20-0626
Statement of Support from the Baltimore Right to Water Coalition

The proposed modifications to the Water Accountability and Equity Act, introduced by City Council President Brandon Scott, are necessary and urgent. Because of ongoing delays in implementing the bill and the ongoing pandemic, this legislation is necessary to get Baltimore back on track to address the city's widespread water affordability crisis, which has only worsened after another 10% rate hike on October 1 and Covid's economic devastation.

The WAEA, which was passed by the City Council in November 2019 and signed into law in January 2020, is groundbreaking legislation to improve the city's water billing practices by (1) setting up a comprehensive Water For All affordability program and (2) creating a new independent Office of the Customer Advocate. On July 9, four days before these programs became legally effective, Mayor Young issued an executive order to delay their effective date until 30 days after the end of the Covid-19 state of emergency.

This bill will allow the next mayor to revoke that executive order to get back on track. It will:

- **Set strong, realistic implementation timelines with benchmarks to track progress:**
 - Immediately: Renter protections and notice requirements, water shutoff moratorium until WAEA is fully effective
 - December 2020: Rules and regulations for ECB appeals
 - January 2021: Creation of the Committee for Oversight to oversee implementation, ECB hearings, collection of data, customer protections
 - April 2021: Draft rules and regulations for affordability program
 - July 2021: Water for All affordability program and Office of Customer Advocate
- **Improve protections for renting families, who make up more than half of Baltimore residents and struggle to access existing DPW assistance:**
 - Require landlords to add tenants to accounts when the tenant is responsible for paying water bills, giving tenants access to water bills, assistance and dispute remedies; and
 - Ensure tenants can access DPW assistance when landlords are unresponsive.
- **Strengthen safeguards assuring the fairer treatment of DPW customers:**
 - Clarify that DPW delays and other arbitrary actions can no longer stop customers from appealing;
 - Specify what data must be used to assess long-standing problems and track if progress is being made;
 - Prevent conflicts of interest and undue influence from hindering customer appeals and policy reforms;
 - Add transparency and public input by requiring that DPW publish rules and regulations for public comment; and
 - Avoid conflicts of interest on the Oversight Committee by replacing the DPW Director with another Mayoral appointee.

Please support this ordinance to turn Baltimore back on the right course to resolve the city's ongoing water affordability and billing issues.