

Testimony before the Ohio House Public Utilities Committee

Proponent Testimony for HB87

Submitted by:
Margaret E. Kuta
3701 Mexico Ave.
Westerville, Oh. 43081
614-506-0020
megkuta@yahoo.com

To Chairman Stautberg, Representatives Goyal and Grossman, and members of the Public Utilities Committee, I thank you for your time and allowing me to testify.

Please imagine for a moment walking into a McDonalds. The gentlemen in line ahead of you orders a Big Mac, and the cashier asks him, "Where do you live?" The man answers, "Westerville," and the cashier says, "That will be \$2." Then you approach the cashier and say, "I'd like a Big Mac as well." The cashier asks you, "Where do you live?" You answer, "Huber Ridge," and the cashier says, "That will be \$8." And you say, "Wait! That can't be right! I'd like to speak to a manager!" So you ask the manager, "Why am I paying four times as much for a hamburger, just because I live a few miles down the street from that other guy? How is that fair? Why is my Big Mac \$8?" And then the manager answers you, "Actually, your Big Mac now costs \$9, because you are paying for my time to listen to you complain."

THAT is how it feels to live in Huber Ridge and have Ohio American Water for a water company. We not only pay four times as much for water as the people who live down the street, but when OAW wants to raise our rates 60% over a four year period, we ALSO pay for their lawyers and their executives and all their expenses trying to put that increase through. And it creates a Catch-22 for us. If we stand up and say, "Wait – that's not fair!" we know that we are paying for someone to listen to us. The more we plead and the more we complain, the more we pay. But to stay silent is to say, "No, our water bill isn't a burden." The bills ARE a burden for my family and the families surrounding us. And we need our voices to be heard.

Actually, the cost of speaking up isn't always only financial. A year ago I testified at a hearing in front of the PUCO to oppose OAW's latest rate increase request. I talked about wearing the same clothes over and over again so that we did less laundry and about leaving the house with a full bladder so that we didn't have as much urine sitting in our toilets. I talked about potty training with our daughter and trying to explain that in our house we only flush some of the time, but everywhere else we flush all the time. I admitted to being afraid to have guests over because they might want to use the

restroom or keep the water running while they washed their hands. And I also confessed to changing my work schedule so that I worked longer days, but fewer days, so I didn't have to shower every day. What I didn't know was that my testimony was being filmed. And that part of it (including the part about how little I shower) was going to be shown on the six o'clock news. I was mortified. The next day my friends, my co-workers, and even my boss came up to me to ask if I had taken a shower or if my house smelled like pee. And then they asked me if I regretted standing up and speaking out and humiliating myself. I had to think about it. But I was able to look them all in the eye and say that the only thing I really regret is paying a \$9.51 service fee every month before I even use a drop of subpar water that will cost me an outrageous amount.

I know the priority in our state right now is about jobs and the economy and keeping businesses and shareholders happy. But here are a few points to consider:

- 1) If OAW shareholders knew that they would be responsible for half of the fees related to rate increases, maybe they would stand up and say, "WHOA – are we spending more on rate cases than other companies? How can we be more efficient and contain these costs? Why aren't we being strategic in how and when we ask for a rate increase?" Maybe ALL the fees and expenses, for both OAW and customers, would go down, if we gave OAW a reason to stop and think before charging ahead with another outrageous rate hike request.
- 2) If all OAW customers were able to pay less for water, we could spend the money we save in our communities, at Mom and Pop stores, in ways that would stimulate local growth.

I'll close with this. A few months ago as I was sleeping, I had a dream that I came home from work to discover my sister standing by my washing machine, washing load after load of towels that were already clean. When I asked, "What are you doing?" my sister said, "Things can never be too clean." And I yelled at her, "Don't you know what we pay for water?" When I woke up, I realized the absurdity of the situation. All the waking hours I have spent stressing over our water bills are now seeping into my nightmares. When my four-year-old daughter has a bad dream, I say to her, "Don't worry – Mommy will protect you – Mommy won't let anything from your dreams hurt you." So the question is, who is going to protect me from the things in MY bad dreams? Who is going to protect me from Ohio American Water? One protector I have is you. You can pass House Bill 87. I urge you, I beg you to make sure that it is passed this year. Another protector I have right now in the Ohio Consumers' Council. I read in the paper last week that the OCC is being accused of spending too much time "tilting at windmills." I find it sad that fighting for Ohio families is considered to be a foolish cause. I thank the OCC for helping me stand up to the very real corporate giant who haunts my dreams. And I thank all of you for the opportunity to speak in front of you today.