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Photo by Kathy Seward MacKay

Ward 5 Alderman Brian McCarthy disputes a newspaper ad by Pennichuck Water Works that appeared in Monday's Telegraph.

2 marketing campaigns under way

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By ANDREW NELSON, Telegraph Staff , nelsona@telegraph-nh.com

NASHUA - On the same day Pennichuck Corp. began its marketing campaign in opposition to the upcoming referendum, city leaders began their own marketing campaign as residents consider whether it makes sense for the city to buy Pennichuck Water Works.

Questions ranging from employee retirement benefits and concerns about the water utility becoming a political football to "socialism" replacing free-market capitalism were bandied around at the first in a series of ward meetings, leading up to the city-wide vote next week.

A skeptical Tom Potter, of 20 Kennedy Drive, had heard all the good things to come out of months of study, but wanted to go deeper.

"I know there has to be some cons," said Potter, his loud voice carrying across the lunchroom, as he read a list of pointed questions from a small slip of paper.

Ward 5 Alderman Brian McCarthy, who also leads the ad hoc aldermanic committee overseeing the Pennichuck-acquisition issue, answered the questions, often talking in generalities.

On the issue of personnel cost, McCarthy said the city's consultants based a city-run water company expenses on the same expenses Pennichuck currently has.

And the income from the operation of the company, plus the savings from operating Pennichuck as a public water company, would allow the company to continue to supply water and the ratepayers would be its owners, he said.

The financial picture is not based on solid figures, McCarthy said, but "based on some guesses that are fairly close."

It would be locally owned, locally managed, and serve the "best interest of the ratepayer, not the shareholder," he said during the discussion.

Even with his questions, Potter said he still believed having the water company based here, instead of a division of Philadelphia Suburban Corp, which is proposing to buy Pennichuck, would be the best.

"I'd would like to see us retain control," he said, before sitting down.

Nearly 50 people filled half the lunchroom at the Elm Street Junior High.

A signal of the high interest in the topic was clear with close to half of the city's 15 aldermen attended. The meeting was recorded and will be aired on local municipal TV Channel 16 on Thursday at 7 p.m. and repeated Sunday at noon.

Other Information sessions are scheduled today through Friday.

A week from today, city voters will go to the polls to decide whether City Hall leaders should begin negotiating with Pennichuck Corp. executives to purchase the water company.

McCarthy and Mayor Bernie Streeter took aim at a Pennichuck advertisement that ran in Monday's Telegraph.

The half-page ad questioned the priority of the city and whether schools, roads and other more typical municipal concerns would be ignored if the city took over the water company.

"There is not one dollar that can be spent on roads and schools that will be spent on the water company," McCarthy said, holding up a clipping of the advertisement.

Streeter called the ad "absolutely false."

He repeated his position that the public ownership of the company is a good step for the city and "savings will automatically accrue."

Both said the borrowed money would be repaid with revenue from ratepayers, not property taxes of city residents.

During the question-and-answer session, critics argued the private sector would be more efficient than government in running the water company.

James Miller, of 5 Columbine Drive, hit on some local controversies, such as the conflict between the new Nashua High School North and nearby neighborhoods, as he raised questions of unintended consequences of a city-run waterworks.

"They don't run our city half-decently," Miller complained.

Zach Janowski, of 16 Eldorado Circle, said water governance would become "complex political" problems, instead of business problems.

"They are doomed to be problematic," he said.

Maurice Arel, president of Pennichuck, sat in the back, scribbling notes on a yellow legal pad.

"I was very impressed by the questions that were asked tonight that were not answered," said Arel, who added many of the issues surrounding a city takeover remain unknown.

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