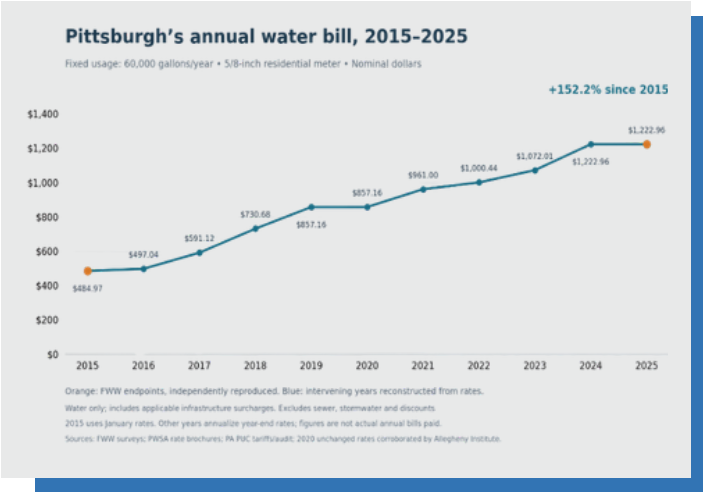
"The City Got What It Paid For"

Pittsburgh Shows Water Rates Reflect Investment, Not Ownership

For decades, local officials in Pittsburgh deferred infrastructure repairs and replacements, keeping rates low. When the system started to fail and was put under the guidance of the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission, the city changed course, beginning to regularly invest in vital infrastructure. As a result, water bills have had to rise 150% to fund the necessary safety and reliability upgrades.



1 Before 2016: "They Kicked the Can Down the Road"

For decades, Pittsburgh city leaders avoided the politically difficult decision of whether to raise water rates. As a result, the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority (PWSA) deferred necessary investments, allowing critical drinking water infrastructure to age and deteriorate.

"For decades, mayors had used the city's water system as a way to fill budget holes and political ambitions … Instead of voting to raise rates to replace aging pipes and outdated pumps, they kicked the can down the road."
Pittsburgh's Public Source

"What we inherited was a system that was not only broken but beyond broken – unable to pay its own bills – let alone fix its problems."
Former Mayor Bill Peduto

"The Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority is an example of an organization that deferred maintenance for many years and is now working to catch up. Its water systems were designed over a hundred years ago."
The Bond Buyer

2 2016-2019: "A Dangerous Crumbling Infrastructure"

$800M+
PWSA DEBT LOAD BY 2016

~50%
OF WATER COULD NOT BE BILLED

By 2016, PWSA's debt load exceeded $800 million. The authority was unable to charge for approximately 50% of water due to leaky pipes and unpaid bills. Multiple executive directors had come and gone. A 2017 report commissioned by the city concluded that PWSA was "a failed organization atop a dangerous and crumbling structure."

Failures in this period resulted in PWSA pleading guilty to federal charges related to discharging sludge into the Allegheny River. The state Attorney General also filed charges alleging PWSA failed to properly protect against lead in drinking water.

Amid sustained public outcry over service failures, Pittsburgh changed course, appointing new PWSA leadership and raising rates to modernize infrastructure that had suffered decades of neglect. In 2017, the state enacted legislation placing PWSA under PUC oversight, which required the Authority to bring the system into compliance with state and federal regulations.

"There is a simple way of telling the story: The city got what it paid for … After years of less-than-sufficient rate increases, the old pipes and pumps that were barely holding together were failing in increasingly dramatic ways." *Pittsburgh's Public Source*

"The philosophy, if you want to call it that, prior to more recent leadership, was fix it as it surfaces and fails … Going out to the public and asking for more is painful. Really, what we're doing here is playing catch-up." *Pittsburgh Water CEO Will Pickering*

"Our thrust [in 2019] is going to be catch up … Much of the work that we're doing now is work that should have been done five, to 10, to 20, to 30 years ago." *Robert Weimar, PWSA Executive Director in 2019*

3 2020-Present: "Building Mode"

Since 2020, the government authority – renamed Pittsburgh Water – has invested approximately $905 million in system infrastructure and has budgeted an additional $1.2 billion for necessary upgrades between 2026 and 2030.

That work is funded by customer bills, which have already increased 150% over a decade and are likely to rise further. **The experience of Pittsburgh's public drinking water system shows rates are driven by infrastructure investment, not ownership.**

"Neighbors ask me what I do. I say, 'I raise your rates' … If you don't do [infrastructure replacements], they don't go away. They just become more expensive and cause more problems." *Jim Turner, PWSA board member in 2021*

"Pittsburgh Water is very much in a 'building' mode, in which Pittsburgh Water's operating expenses, total debt, and debt service costs, have and will continue to go up every year." *Ed Barca, Pittsburgh Water Director of Finance*

"It's always an assumption that that water is going to be coming out of the tap whenever they need it. It really does take generations to ensure that you have a system that can support [it]." *Barry King, Pittsburgh Water Director of Engineering and Construction*

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