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United Water customers will see bills rise due to 19.1 percent rate increase

\$6.75 a month hike for average user

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TOMS RIVER BUREAU

TOMS RIVER — United Water Toms River customers will see their average monthly bills rise by nearly \$7 as a result of the 19.1 percent rate increase approved Monday by the state Board of Public Utilities.

"We fully realize that this is a difficult economy right now. However, like many water companies across the nation, we continue to confront the challenges of aging water infrastructure and the need to ensure the safety and reliability of our water system," said Rick Pfleiderer, director of operations for United Water, in a prepared statement.

He said the rate increase is directly related to the water quality improvements that were made at the Holly Water Treatment Plant in Toms River and the Berkeley Radionuclide Treatment Plant on Mule Road in Berkeley, which were mandated by the state Department of Environmental Protection.

Greg Reinert, spokesman for the BPU, said the board unanimously approved the 19.1 percent increase.

United Water Toms River had requested for a 39.7 percent rate increase, which angered many residents and town officials, after the BPU unanimously approved a 62 percent increase for United Water Toms River customers in January 2009.

"I'm never happy to see any of our taxpayers' rates go up on anything, but I'm gratified it's only 19.1 percent and not the 39 percent they asked for," Toms River Mayor Thomas F. Kelaher said.

Berkeley Mayor Jason J. Varano said United Water Toms River has been more sensitive to the township's needs in the past year, and he understands that the upgrades were necessary, but called the latest increase "absurd."

Many of the township's United Water customers are on fixed incomes, he said. "Especially in times when everybody is making cuts and trying to do the least amount of increases possible, this size of an increase is disturbing," Varano said.

According to United Water, the typical residential customer, using an average of 5,300 gallons of water per month, will see an average bill increase of \$6.75 a month, or about 22 cents per day. The increase primarily was related to water-system improvements and inflationary impacts on overall operating expenses, and will provide the company with an additional \$4.9 million in annual revenue.

The company's service area includes 125,000 customers in Toms River, South Toms River and Berkeley's Manitou Park section and Holiday City and Silver Ridge Park adult communities.