



State of New Jersey

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November 1, 2022

VIA Electronic Delivery

The Honorable Carmen Diaz, Acting Secretary
State of New Jersey, Board of Public Utilities
44 South Clinton Avenue, 10th Floor
P.O. Box 350
Trenton, New Jersey 08625-0350

**Re: I/M/O The Petition of Gordon's Corner Water Company, Inc.
for Approval of a Municipal Consent to Provide Water Service
to a Portion of Colts Neck Township**

BPU Docket No.: WE22060370

Dear Secretary Diaz:

Please accept for filing the Division of Rate Counsel's ("Rate Counsel") comments in the above-referenced petition. Thank you for your consideration and attention to this matter.

Background & Analysis

On or about June 3, 2022, Gordon's Corner Water Company, Inc. ("Company") filed a petition ("Petition") seeking approval of a municipal consent ("Municipal Consent") by Colts Neck Township (the "Township") granting the Company a limited franchise to provide water service to a certain area of Colts Neck Township. The Municipal Consent was granted pursuant

to Resolution No. 2021-172 (“Resolution 172”), adopted on September 8, 2021.¹ The Township’s Municipal Consent authorizes the Company to extend its system into the Township for a community not previously served by the Company.

The area for which the Municipal Consent is granted is the site of a new court-mandated multi-family development located at Block 22, Lot 18 on the Official Tax Map of the Township. The development at build-out will include three hundred sixty (360) total residential units, with eighty percent (80%) of those units to be market rate units and the remaining twenty percent (20%) of the units to be multifamily rental units affordable to very low-, low-, and moderate-income households.² Construction of the development will further the Township’s efforts to comply with its Mount Laurel constitutional obligation to provide its fair share of housing to low and moderate income families.³

Resolution 172 provides the Municipal Consent for the Company to provide water service to the proposed development and it grants access to public streets and places for that purpose.⁴ Resolution 172 is silent as to the term of the grant of the Municipal Consent and the term of the grant of access to public streets.

Resolution 172 grants municipal consent to construct and maintain water facilities and provide water service as defined in N.J.S.A. 48:2-14, N.J.S.A. 48:3-11, N.J.S.A. 48:3-15, N.J.S.A. 48:19-17, and N.J.S.A. 48:19-20 all subject to approval of the Board. The Municipal Consent grants the Company a franchise to provide water service to a specific development located at Block 22, Lot 18 but to no other portions of the Township. Resolution 172 also

¹ Petition at Paragraph 3.

² Petition at Paragraph 5.

³ Resolution 172 at Page 1.

⁴ Resolution 172, Paragraphs 2 and 3.

allows access to public streets and places for these purposes and it is silent as to the term of the grant of access to public streets and places. N.J.S.A. 48:3-15 limits such grants to a maximum term of fifty years. The Company acknowledges this restriction on the duration of the consent in its response to RCR-3.

A public hearing on the Petition was held virtually, on October 4, 2022. No members of the public attended and no written comments from the public were submitted.

Terms of Consent

The Board's consideration of the referenced Petition is governed by several related statutes. N.J.S.A. 48:2-14 provides that "[n]o privilege or franchise granted after May first, one thousand nine hundred and eleven, to any public utility by a political subdivision of this state shall be valid until approved by the board." This statute also empowers the Board to "impose such conditions as to construction, equipment, maintenance, service or operation as the public convenience and interests may reasonably require." N.J.S.A. 48:3-11 et seq. governs a municipal grant to a utility of the right to use the municipality's streets and other public places. Under N.J.S.A. 48:3-15, such grants must be for "a period not exceeding fifty years." No specific reference to the provisions of N.J.S.A. 48:3-15 and the fifty-year term limit is made in Resolution 172.

As noted, the Municipal Consent purports to grant two types of consent—consent to provide water service, and consent to lay and maintain pipes and other facilities. The right to provide water utility service within the Township granted by Resolution 172 is not limited with respect to the fifty-year limit on the duration of the consent to lay pipes in public places set in N.J.S.A. 48:3-15.

None of these statutes contemplates the grant of a municipal consent in perpetuity. Under both N.J.S.A. 48:2-14 and N.J.S.A. 48:3-11 et seq., both a municipality and the Board must consider a utility's request to do business within the municipality. If such consents were given perpetual effect, then there would be no such role for future governing bodies of the municipality, or for future Boards. It is Rate Counsel's position that the Legislature did not intend to enable municipalities, or the Board, to take action that would be binding on future municipal officials, and future Boards, in perpetuity.

Perpetuities are not favored under New Jersey law. As stated by the New Jersey Supreme Court, “[p]erpetual contractual performance is not favored in the law and is to be avoided” absent a clear expression of intent. In re Estate of Alton Glenn Miller, 90 N.J. 210, 218 (1982). In the absence of such an expression of intent, the court will determine a term that is reasonable under the circumstances. Id. at 209. This same principle applies to governmental action. As the Court explained in West Caldwell Bor. v. Caldwell Bor., 26 N.J. 9, 31 (1958) “a municipality cannot bind itself by a perpetual contract, or a contract of unreasonable duration, unless by legislative sanction.” Thus, the Court held that an agreement without a specified term to maintain connections to a neighboring municipality's sewerage system, and pay the associated fees, would be interpreted as continuing for a “reasonable time” based on the construction and other costs incurred in reliance on the agreement and other relevant facts and circumstances. Id. at 31-32. See also Town of Secaucus v. City of Jersey City, 20 N.J. Tax 562, 571-72 (2003) (holding that an agreement by Secaucus to waive “forever” its right to challenge certain tax exemptions granted by Jersey City was invalid as contrary to public policy); Dorchester Manor v. New Milford Bor., 287 N.J. Super. 163, 169-70 (L. Div. 1994) (holding that municipality's agreement to provide garbage removal service two days a week to a garden

apartment development was binding, at most, for a reasonable period after the date of the agreement).

The grant of an unlimited duration of the Municipal Consent to provide service is inconsistent with the role envisioned for municipalities by the New Jersey Legislature with regard to utility service within their borders. As noted above, under N.J.S.A. 48:3-15, municipal grants of the right to use streets and other public places are explicitly limited to fifty years. Neither N.J.S.A. 48:19-20, which specifically addresses water utilities, nor N.J.S.A. 48:2-14 gives explicit sanction for a municipality to grant, or the Board to approve, a franchise in perpetuity. In the absence of a specific statutory authorization to create a perpetually binding obligation, the consent to provide utility service within the Township must be limited to a reasonable period of time. Rate Counsel believes it would be reasonable to make the franchise term consistent with the term limit on the use of the Township's streets. The Legislature has determined that a municipality is required to review its authorization for a utility to use its streets no less frequently than every fifty years. The Township also failed to address this explicit limitation in its Resolution 172. It would be both reasonable and practical for the Township to re-examine consent for the provision of utility service at the same time it re-examines the consent to use streets.

Rate Counsel believes the Legislature reserved to the Board the authority to review municipal consents in order to preserve regulatory consistency and oversight throughout the State. A reasonable limitation on the duration of such consents is necessary to balance the utility's interests against the need for continuing oversight by the municipality and the Board.

For the reasons set forth above, reasonable term limits should be established as a condition of the Board's approval of the Municipal Consent. As noted previously, the Board is authorized to impose such conditions through the powers delegated by the Legislature in N.J.S.A. 48:2-14.

Recommendation

Rate Counsel does not object to the Petitioner's request for approval of the Township's Municipal Consent subject to the recommendation that the Board modifies the term of the consent to provide water service to fifty years from the date of the grant. Similarly, and separately, Rate Counsel recommends that the Board modify the term of consent to access public streets to a maximum of fifty years consistent with the limitation in N.J.S.A. 48:3-15. Rate Counsel believes that the Board should act within its purview to establish conditions on the Township's Municipal Consent needed to assure consistency with N.J.S.A. 48:3-15. Specifically, the term of the consent should be limited to fifty years for the specific authorization to provide water service and to access public streets and places within the Township. Rate Counsel also notes the Company's response to RCR-3 in which the Company recognizes that the term of the municipal ordinance is limited to fifty years.

Accordingly, Rate Counsel recommends that any Board Order approving the Petition contain the following language:

1. This Order shall not be construed as directly or indirectly fixing for any purposes whatsoever any value of any tangible or intangible assets now owned or hereafter to be owned by the Petitioner.
2. This Order shall not affect nor in any way limit the exercise of the authority of this Board or of this State, in any future Petition or in any proceedings with respect to rates, franchises, service, financing, accounting, capitalization, depreciation, or in any other matter affecting the Petitioner.

3. The Petitioner shall not depreciate any portion of the water system that is funded by CIAC.
4. As required by N.J.S.A. 48:3-15, the municipal consent for the use of streets is limited to a term of fifty years from the effective date of this Order.
5. In order to ensure periodic municipal and Board review, the term of the municipal consent to provide water service under N.J.S.A. 48:2-14 is limited to the same period as the municipal consent for the use of streets and other places.

These provisions will satisfy the concerns of Rate Counsel that the Petitioner complies with the proper statutory framework, that Board approval is limited to the specific approvals requested, and that there is no authorization to include any specific assets or amounts in rate base, nor authorization for any other ratemaking treatment. If the Board adopts these conditions, Rate Counsel is not opposed to approval of the Petition.

Respectfully submitted,

Brian O. Lipman, Esq.
Director, Rate Counsel

By: /s/ Emily Smithman
Emily Smithman, Esq.
Assistant Deputy Rate Counsel

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cc: Service List via e-mail

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