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The PUC should tell Easton and Bethlehem water authorities to split their differences over disputed territory in Bethlehem Township

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bethlehem vs. easton

Maybe we're missing something, but should municipalities be competing for water customers, to the potential detriment of ratepayers on either side?

That's the crux of a case going before the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission, which will be asked to decide an east-west fight for new water customers in Bethlehem Township. The city of Bethlehem and the Easton Suburban Water Authority each want to claim fertile territory, including a development under way by St. Luke's Hospital and residential subdivisions near Route 33 and Freemansburg Avenue.

This turf war should have been settled by a revenue-sharing compromise, but negotiations broke down. Bethlehem Mayor John Callahan said the city asked the PUC to allow the city to extend its water system into the disputed area. Easton Suburban Manager Roy White termed the move a hostile takeover attempt, noting the authority has built and serviced the existing water network in the area.

If possession were 90 percent of the law, this case would be a snap to settle, but it's not that simple. Bethlehem, which gets its water from Pocono reservoirs, has excess supply. It wants to spend \$6 million on system upgrades, including extending lines into Bethlehem Township, to generate \$1.3 million a year in new revenue. On paper, that's a good deal. For Bethlehem.

The Easton Suburban Water Authority has financial pressures, too, having taken over Easton's water plant and network through a long-term lease, which included generating new revenue and tapping fees in Bethlehem Township to help with renovations. In terms of who has provided the initiative, investment and grunt work to bring public water to most of Bethlehem Township, there's no argument.

A side issue here is the quality of water. Folks at St. Luke's and elsewhere are said to be lobbying for Bethlehem's reservoir water over Easton's Delaware River water.

Another issue is cost. Easton Suburban can supply water for a fraction of Bethlehem's cost -- and it doesn't have to build miles of mains to get to the Route 33 area. It's already there.

The PUC should decide this case on practicality, cost and existing infrastructure -- not on taste tests. One option is to tell the combatants to split the cost through a water-purchasing agreement, like the one rejected previously by both parties.

It might be as easy as setting a price and sending everyone home.

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