THE METROPOLITAN WATER DISTRICT OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Committee Item
ACTION

Community and Workplace Culture Committee

10/12/2026 Committee Meeting

8-9

Subject

Approve recommendations to the Legislation and Communications Committee regarding Legislative and Regulatory Priorities for Disadvantaged Communities

Executive Summary

On September 22, 2026, the Community and Workplace Culture (CWC) Committee hosted a Metropolitan member agency panel discussion on advocacy priorities for underserved communities. The panel discussed water issues affecting underserved communities in the context of exploring possible legislative priorities and principles that the CWC Committee could consider for recommendation to the Legislation and Communications (LEG) Committee for possible inclusion in the upcoming 2027 Legislative Priorities and Principles development process.

Common discussion themes by the panel included affordability for low-income communities; a general lack of trust in tap water evidenced by high bottled water sales in underserved communities; aging infrastructure; water quality issues; and capacity constraints to effectively use available resources. Suggested solutions included a variety of administrative actions and programs that can be implemented under existing authorities, as well as suggestions that would require legislation or financial appropriation at the state or federal level.

Staff have identified possible legislative priorities and principles from the panel discussion that could assist underserved communities within the Metropolitan service area for the CWC Committee's consideration.

Proposed Action(s)/Recommendation(s) and Options

Staff Recommendation: Option 1

Option #1

Approve recommendations to the Legislation and Communications Committee regarding Legislative and Regulatory Priorities for Disadvantaged Communities

Fiscal Impact: None

Business Analysis: There is no direct fiscal or operational impact; adoption of legislative priorities and principles supports legislative staff's ability to address priority matters in a timely manner related to legislative and regulatory activities.

Option #2

Do not approve recommendations to the Legislation and Communications (LEG) Committee regarding Legislative and Regulatory Priorities for Disadvantaged Communities

Fiscal Impact: None

Business Analysis: There is no direct fiscal or operational impact; the absence of legislative priorities and principles can hinder legislative staff's ability to address priority matters in a timely manner related to legislative and regulatory activities.

Alternatives Considered

Not applicable

Applicable Policy

Metropolitan Water District Administrative Code Section 11104: Delegation of Responsibilities

Related Board Action(s)/Future Action(s)

The draft 2027 Legislative Priorities and Principles will be presented to the LEG Committee as an information item on November 9, 2026.

The 2026 Legislative Priorities and Principles were adopted by the Board of Directors on December 9, 2025 (Minute Item 54347).

Summary of Outreach Completed

All member agencies were invited to participate in an in-person panel discussion on advocacy priorities for underserved communities on September 22, 2026, at the CWC Committee. Eight member agencies participated: Calleguas Municipal Water District, Central Basin Municipal Water District, City of Burbank, City of Long Beach, Municipal Water District of Orange County, San Diego County Water Authority, West Basin Municipal Water District, and Western Municipal Water District.

California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA)

CEQA determination for Option #1:
The proposed action is not defined as a project under CEQA because it involves organizational, maintenance, or administrative activities; personnel-related actions; and/or general policy and procedure making that will not result in direct or indirect physical changes in the environment. (Public Resources Code Section 21065; State CEQA Guidelines Section 15378(b)(2) and (5).

CEQA determination for Option #2:

None required

Details and Background

Background

On September 22, 2026, the CWC Committee hosted a Metropolitan member agency panel discussion on advocacy priorities for underserved communities. The use of the term "underserved community" is intended to be consistent with the definition of "disadvantaged community" in California Water Code Section 79505.5: "a community with an annual median household income that is less than 80 percent of the statewide annual median household income." The panel discussed agency-level water issues affecting underserved communities in the context of possible legislative priorities and principles to recommend to the CWC Committee for consideration. The CWC Committee may recommend the suggested legislative priorities and principles related to underserved communities to the LEG Committee for consideration and possible inclusion in the upcoming 2027 Legislative Priorities and Principles development process.

Common Challenges

The far-ranging panel discussion began with identifying common challenges across the member agencies. These themes included the following:

- Water affordability, at both the community/system level given the high cost of compliance in environmentally impacted communities and at the household level for low-income households and residents of multifamily housing. Panel members also discussed the rising cost of developing and delivering supplies, including measures like annexation, as a factor that affects affordability. Rate increases can be particularly impactful for low-income households and residents in multifamily housing, and increasing awareness of existing customer support programs can help.
- Building trust in tap water. Tap water is highly regulated and a more affordable alternative to the bottled water options that continue to be a significant source of drinking water in underserved communities. Multiple panelists identified that distrust in tap water was nuanced, including possibly both cultural elements and behind-the-meter (aging residential pipes, for example) components.

- Water quality issues faced in underserved communities, which are more likely to have aging infrastructure, encounter more environmental impacts from pollution and climate change, and suffer from a lack of capital investment for repairs and taste and odor issues (re: secondary water quality), even if the water meets primary drinking water standards. Water quality concerns, whether related to the condition and age of residential plumbing and/or cultural components, could be a driver of community distrust in tap water.
- Capacity constraints, where smaller agencies cannot effectively access or use resources that may be available to them due to staffing and financial limitations.

Some of the suggestions panelists offered to address these issues may be better advanced administratively than through legislative or regulatory initiatives. For example, there was strong support and interest in regional collaboration and a shared service model, in which larger water agencies could provide technical, financial and managerial expertise to smaller or less-resourced agencies. The Municipal Water District of Orange County highlighted their success pooling resources for water-use efficiency, leak detection, PFAS treatment, and lead/copper inventory work across member agencies, which allowed for achieving economies of scale that could be replicated regionally. Providing grant writing assistance to agencies serving low-income communities, which generally have fewer staff and limited financial capacity to access grant or funding opportunities was also recommended. Another well-received example was Metropolitan's Member Agency Administered Program, in which Metropolitan and member agencies co-fund programs that are designed and administered by the member agency allowing more targeted and precise programming to be more responsive to local needs. Finally, the panel supported increased communication by the water industry on relevant matters ranging from increasing awareness of customer support programs, like leak detection, to understanding water quality.

The panelists all supported additional funding streams for educational initiatives on water quality and trust in tap campaigns. Further, there was strong support for developing and increasing access to flexible sources of funding through bonds or other state/federal funding streams for system improvements (not only new projects), including storage, regional water distribution flexibility, and other needed capital improvements to increase resiliency. The eligibility criteria could also be broadened with more focus on public benefits. The panel also discussed potentially addressing current limitations within retail rate structures through Proposition 218 as applicable to retail agencies. Finally, one idea that came up was to require that bottled water companies publish and advertise consumer confidence reports like public water agency annual water quality reporting, so consumers can compare water quality regulation compliance.

Proposed Legislative Priorities and Principles

Metropolitan's 2026 Legislative Priorities and Principles (LPP) include several priorities and principles that address the needs of underserved communities. The purpose of the LPP is to provide Board guidance and direction on anticipated legislative and regulatory matters in the coming legislative session to assist the General Manager and legislative staff in determining Metropolitan bill positions and guide advocacy efforts.

Given the panel discussion, staff recommend that the CWC Committee approve the following suggested legislative priorities and principles relating to underserved communities for recommendation to the LEG Committee, for that Committee's consideration and possible inclusion in the upcoming 2027 LPP development. Because the LPP uses the term "disadvantaged community," that term is being used in the suggestions rather than "underserved community." If approved by the CWC Committee, staff will forward the recommendation to the LEG Committee.

The suggested legislative priorities and principles are as follows:

LPP Section		Title	New/Revised Draft Policy Principle
Drinking Water, Water Governance, Affordability and Funding	New	Fund connection of disadvantaged/underserved communities	Reduce financial barriers to connecting disadvantaged communities to safe and reliable water systems, where such connections are feasible and supported by the affected water systems.
Drinking Water, Water Governance, Affordability and Funding	New	Address financing barriers to allow equitable access to funding and technical assistance	Improve access to state, federal, and regional funding programs for disadvantaged communities and resource-constrained water systems by reducing administrative and cash flow barriers to developing and accessing grants and providing technical assistance to help access funds and address challenges.
Infrastructure	Edit existing principle	Rehabilitation of aging infrastructure funding	Initiate, expedite, and defray the costs of planning, financing, constructing, repairing, and rehabilitating water and power infrastructure projects, including but not limited to general obligation bonds, tax-exempt municipal bonds, grants, low-interest loans, and direct appropriations. Ensure equitable cost-sharing of water and power infrastructure projects and promote funding criteria that recognize water affordability and the needs of disadvantaged communities
Drinking Water, Water Quality and Treatment	New	Support transparency of water quality in bottled drinking water	Support transparency and consumer access to comparable information regarding the water quality and regulatory standards of public drinking water and commercially bottled water to help consumers make informed drinking water choices.

Timing and Urgency

To be included in the 2027 LPP development and approval process, it is recommended that the CWC Committee approve and forward legislative priorities and principles to the Legislation and Communications Committee, in time for their November informational discussion on the 2027 LPP.

10/7/2026

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Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Officer

10/7/2026

Shivaji Deshmukh *Date*
General Manager

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