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**HOUSE BILL 1948**

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**State of Washington 67th Legislature 2022 Regular Session**

**By** Representative Steele

AN ACT Relating to failing water system receivership and rehabilitation; and amending RCW 43.70.195 and 70A.125.180.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

**Sec.**  RCW 43.70.195 and 1999 c 153 s 57 are each amended to read as follows:

(1) In any action brought by the secretary of health or by a local health officer pursuant to chapter 7.60 RCW to place a public water system in receivership, the petition shall include the names of one or more suitable candidates for receiver who have consented to assume operation of the water system. The department shall maintain a list of interested and qualified individuals, municipal entities, special purpose districts, and investor-owned water companies with experience in the provision of water service and a history of satisfactory operation of a water system. If there is no other person willing and able to be named as receiver, the court shall appoint the ((~~county in which the water system is located as receiver~~)) department. The ((~~county~~)) department may designate a county agency to operate the system, or it may contract with another individual or public water system to provide management for the system. If the ((~~county~~)) department or another public entity is appointed as receiver, the secretary of health and the county health officer shall provide regulatory oversight for the agency or other person responsible for managing the water system.

(2) In any petition for receivership under subsection (1) of this section, the department shall recommend that the court grant to the receiver full authority to act in the best interests of the customers served by the public water system. The receiver shall assess the capability, in conjunction with the department and local government, for the system to operate in compliance with health and safety standards, and shall report to the court and the petitioning agency its recommendations for the system's future operation, including the formation of a water-sewer district or other public entity, or ownership by another existing water system capable of providing service.

(3) If a petition for receivership and verifying affidavit executed by an appropriate departmental official allege an immediate and serious danger to residents constituting an emergency, the court shall set the matter for hearing within three days and may appoint a temporary receiver ex parte upon the strength of such petition and affidavit pending a full evidentiary hearing, which shall be held within fourteen days after receipt of the petition.

(4) A bond, if any is imposed upon a receiver, shall be minimal and shall reasonably relate to the level of operating revenue generated by the system. Any receiver appointed pursuant to this section shall not be held personally liable for any good faith, reasonable effort to assume possession of, and to operate, the system in compliance with the court's orders.

(5) The court shall authorize the receiver to impose reasonable assessments on a water system's customers to recover expenditures for improvements necessary for the public health and safety. The department shall consider the federal environmental protection agency guidance on evaluating water system rate affordability for customers. If reasonable assessments are insufficient to recover improvement expenditures or temporary water provision, then the water system receiver shall be reimbursed by the water system acquisition and rehabilitation program pursuant to RCW 70A.125.180 upon approval of a water system plan.

(6) No later than twelve months after appointment of a receiver, the petitioning agency, ((~~in conjunction with the county in which the system is located,~~)) and the appropriate state and local health agencies, shall develop and present to the court a plan for the disposition of the system. The report shall include the recommendations of the receiver made pursuant to subsection (2) of this section. The report shall include all reasonable and feasible alternatives. After receiving the report, the court shall provide notice to interested parties and conduct such hearings as are necessary. The court shall then order the parties to implement one of the alternatives, or any combination thereof, for the disposition of the system. Such order shall include a date, or proposed date, for the termination of the receivership. Nothing in this section authorizes a court to require a city, town, public utility district, water-sewer district, or irrigation district to accept a system that has been in receivership unless the city, town, public utility district, water-sewer district, or irrigation district agrees to the terms and conditions outlined in the plan adopted by the court.

(7) The court shall not terminate the receivership, and order the return of the system to the owners, unless the department of health approves of such an action. The court may impose reasonable conditions upon the return of the system to the owner, including the posting of a bond or other security, routine performance and financial audits, employment of qualified operators and other staff or contracted services, compliance with financial viability requirements, or other measures sufficient to ensure the ongoing proper operation of the system.

(8) If, as part of the ultimate disposition of the system, an eminent domain action is commenced by a public entity to acquire the system, the court shall oversee any appraisal of the system conducted under Title 7 RCW to assure that the appraised value properly reflects any reduced value because of the necessity to make improvements to the system. The court shall have the authority to approve the appraisal, and to modify it based on any information provided at an evidentiary hearing. The court's determination of the proper value of the system, based on the appraisal, shall be final, and only appealable if not supported by substantial evidence. If the appraised value is appealed, the court may order that the system's ownership be transferred upon payment of the approved appraised value.

**Sec.**  RCW 70A.125.180 and 2020 c 20 s 1359 are each amended to read as follows:

Subject to the availability of amounts appropriated for this specific purpose, the department shall provide financial assistance through a water system acquisition and rehabilitation program, hereby created. The program shall be jointly administered with the public works board and the department of commerce. The agencies shall adopt guidelines for the program using as a model the procedures and criteria of the drinking water revolving loan program authorized under RCW 70A.125.160. All financing provided through the program must be in the form of grants that partially cover project costs. The maximum grant to any eligible entity may not exceed twenty-five percent of the funds allocated to the appropriation in any fiscal year except for those systems in receivership pursuant to RCW 43.70.195.

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