

Overloaded and Underfunded: Representative Stark's District's Aging Infrastructure Needs a Clean Water Trust Fund

America's clean water systems – the pipes, sewers, and treatment facilities that keep our society afloat – are in serious trouble. The federal government estimates that every year we fall more than \$20 billion short of what is needed to maintain and improve our water infrastructure.¹

States and localities, grappling with tight budgets and projected future needs far beyond projected funding capabilities, have traditionally relied on the federal government to support continued access to this essential public resource. However, money for the federal Clean Water State Revolving Fund, which supports state and local efforts, is drying up, leaving governments, utilities and citizens struggling to clean up the mess.

Across the country, the consequences of inadequate infrastructure investment are already being felt – as many as 75,000 times a year, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, which says that sewage overflows from poorly-designed or degraded systems emit 1.26 trillion gallons of untreated filth annually.² These overflows, which cost more than \$50 billion a year in cleanup costs, are not sent to some faraway wilderness; they are spilling into our local streams and beaches, our homes and the source water we eventually drink.³

In Your Backyard: The infrastructure crisis caused a stink in the Ponderosa Landing neighborhood of Union City. The community, directly downwind of the city's wastewater treatment plant, was overwhelmed by an

“Our system is very old. We want to make sure it is working effectively.”

– Rich Currie, general manager for the Union Sanitary District¹⁵



intense stench, described by some as a “pungent, gagging kind of odor.”⁴ After a jump in complaints, Union Sanitary District, jointly with Union City, formed an odor task force and undertook an \$80,000 study to evaluate the plant and find the source of the smell.⁵

This is not the only problem wafting over Union Sanitary District. Its 770 miles of sewer lines are aging and its treatment plant is outdated. The system requires expensive upgrades and repairs to effectively treat the 30 million gallons of wastewater it collects each day from people in Fremont, Newark and Union City.⁶ Over the next five years through 2012, the district plans to spend \$67 million on improvement projects.⁷

Newark alone needs \$7 million to repair its pump station and \$2 million to replace a segment of its 46-year-old piping. Carrying 2 to 3 million gallons of sewage every day, this sewer line could cause serious trouble were it to leak.⁸



“Everything is competing. The bridge tolls went up a dollar, the sales tax just went up another half a percent. Even bread went up in price. It’s just one of those things where there’s no right time.”

– Bill Pease, Fremont city councilmember¹⁷

California’s water needs outpace its current ability to fund projects by a large margin. The state’s most recent Clean Water State Revolving Fund Intended Use Plan lists 691 projects at a total cost of \$10.5 billion over the next five years. In 2007, the state received \$76.5 million in federal funding – enough to finance 1/137th of its needs.¹³ EPA estimates California’s current wastewater spending needs at \$18.17 billion.¹⁴

Time for a Federal Clean Water Trust Fund

Given the fickle year-to-year availability of clean water funding and the urgency of our needs, we have to find a new solution. Our problems are not just local; watersheds are linked, and one community’s water flows downstream to become another’s. Neither are our resources; water belongs to all of us, and clean, healthy, affordable public water is every community’s right. The best answer would cover California and the entire nation, ensure steady, reliable funding to meet future needs, liberate the process from partisan bickering, and avoid penalizing ratepayers.

A federal clean water trust fund would do just that, guaranteeing clean water for generations to come. By sidestepping the contentious appropriations process, a trust fund would safeguard our infrastructure, our environment, and our economy – all without adding to the national debt. For more information on keeping clean water a reality, consult Food & Water Watch’s report *Clear Waters: Why America Needs a Clean Water Trust Fund*, available at www.foodandwaterwatch.org/water/americaswater/clearwaters.

To pay for such necessary maintenance and improvements, the sanitary district has had to increase sewer rates over the last few years. From 2004 to 2007, sewer fees grew by about 5 percent a year, and from 2008 to 2010, they will increase by 6.5 percent a year.⁹ Absent a much-needed increase in federal support, families across the tri-city area will see their wastewater bills continue to climb.

EPA’s most recent assessment of the San Francisco Bay and Coyote watersheds found 63 individual impairments to water quality, including contaminated sediments, coliform bacteria and trash.¹⁰

Across California: Statewide, EPA says that 93 percent of California’s assessed river miles and lakes suffer from impaired water quality. Additionally, 78 percent of waters do not support fish consumption, and nearly all of the state’s bays and estuaries are seriously hampered.¹¹

Yet while the needs are apparent, the funding to keep our water clean and safe is drying up. Overall federal contributions to the state’s clean water funding efforts have decreased by 47.8 percent since 1991; nearly 66 percent when adjusted for inflation.¹²

“It’s a pungent, gagging kind of odor.”

– Andrew Preston, a resident of Union City¹⁶

Endnotes

¹ “The Clean Water and Drinking Water Gap Analysis.” Office of Water, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Sept. 30, 2002. Available at www.epa.gov/safewater/gapreport.pdf

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⁴ Artz, Matthew. “Union City residents cry foul over odor,” *The Daily Review* (Hayward, CA), Dec. 8, 2006.

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⁶ De Benedetti, Chris. “Union Sanitary District flush with kudos.” *Alameda Times-Star*, Feb. 8, 2006.

⁷ “Ten-year CIP FY08-17 Expenditure Plan,” Draft v.6, Union County Sanitary District, June 8, 2007, p 1-5.

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¹³ “State of California Clean Water State Revolving Fund Final Intended Use Plan for State Fiscal Year 2006/2007.” State Water Resources Control Board, California Environmental Protection Agency, May 1, 2007. Available at: www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/grants_loans/srf/docs/final2007iup.pdf

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¹⁵ Artz, Matthew. “Union city tries to sniff out stench,” *The Daily Review* (Hayward, CA), June 5, 2007.

¹⁶ Artz, Matthew. “Union City residents cry foul over odor,” *The Daily Review* (Hayward, CA), Dec. 8, 2006.

¹⁷ Wong, Scott. “Fremont ponders utility-user tax.” *The Argus* (Fremont-Newark), July 4, 2004.

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