

Overloaded and Underfunded: Cook County'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

“If we don't deal with the combined sewer overflow problem, the Great Lakes will become the Not-So-Great Lakes.”

– Michele Merkel, *Environmental Integrity Project*¹⁸



In Your Backyard: In the summer of 2007, Chicago spilled hundreds of millions of gallons of sewage water into Lake Michigan.⁴ Chicago is just one of more than 700 cities that built combined sewer systems before most people were thinking about potential environmental and public health consequences.⁵

Heavy rains frequently force these systems to overflow, disgorging billions of gallons of untreated human waste into the Great Lakes and surrounding waterways. As of 2005, more than half of the municipalities in the Great Lakes region failed to meet basic reporting and maintenance requirements for combined sewer overflows, and they lacked long term plans for updating needed infrastructure.⁶

Chicago has taken great steps to repair its aging, crumbling sewer system. The city spends around \$50 million a year to clean and upgrade the 150-year-old system,⁷ and it is in the middle of an enormous 50-year, \$3 billion



project to prevent sewage and stormwater from overflowing into rivers and canals.⁸ When completed in 2023, the Deep Tunnel project will handle 20 billion gallons of water in its massive labyrinth of underground tunnels and huge reservoirs.⁹

To pay for some of these necessary infrastructure improvements, Chicago plans to hike water and sewer rates by more than 50 percent over the next three years.¹⁰ Chicagoans and residents of the surrounding 160 municipalities that get their water from the city will feel the effects of these steep price increases.¹¹ Absent a much-needed increase in federal support, it will only get worse.

EPA's most recent assessment of the three watersheds in the area – the Chicago, Des Plaines and Little Calumet-Galien – found 811 individual impairments to water quality, including fecal coliform bacteria and solid trash.¹²

Across Illinois: According to a 2004 state assessment, 38 percent of river miles and 60 percent of Illinois lakes suffer from impaired water quality. Additionally, none of its Great Lakes waters fully support fish consumption, and 75 percent are considered unsafe for swimming.¹³

A report by the Natural Resources Defense Council shows nationwide beach closings and swimming advisories were at an all-time high in 2006. Illinois experienced 591 closure or advisory events lasting six weeks or fewer in 2006, up from 585 in 2005. And 2006 saw the state issue two permanent closures, up from one the previous year.¹⁴

Unfortunately, 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.¹⁵ Illinois suffers from a significant funding gap,

“Chicago once reversed the flow of the Chicago River in a bid to manage its waste water. Now it has constructed a vast underground river system. It’s a far less visible achievement but it’s equally impressive.”

– the editorial board of the Chicago Sun-Times²¹

with 188 projects on its proposed fiscal 2008 Clean Water State Revolving Fund Intended Use Plan, and current wastewater spending needs of \$693.5 million over the next three years.¹⁶ The state's 2007 federal clean water allotment, meanwhile, amounted to a mere \$48.4 million.¹⁷

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 and becomes another's. Neither are our resources; water belongs to all of us, and clean, healthy, affordable public water is every community's right. So the ideal answer would cover Illinois and the entire nation, ensure steady, reliable funding to meet future needs, liberate the process from political interference 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.

“We don’t welcome rate increases, but at least they’re addressing their problems. It’s unfortunate that Chicago has to do this, but we understand why. They have an aging infrastructure.”

– Jason Bajor, city manager of Des Plaines, a suburban client of Chicago’s water utility¹⁹

Endnotes

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