

# Overloaded and Underfunded: Grand Rapids'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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

**In Your Backyard:** In 2006, more than 32 million gallons of wastewater gushed from Grand Rapids' sewer system into Grand River, which empties into Lake Michigan. This amount, although substantial, pales in comparison to the 12,600 million gallons the city released in the



late 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the city has taken great measures to reduce its spills, but more needs to be done to eliminate all combined sewer overflows by the state-mandated deadline of 2019.<sup>5</sup>

Over the last two decades, Grand Rapids has spent more than \$210 million to separate its wastewater and storm-water systems and to cut back on sewage overflows. While the project has been successful and reduced 99 percent of spills, the city must spend millions more to eliminate that last 1 percent.<sup>6</sup> On top of it all, the sewer system needs another \$200 million worth of improvements to meet its future sewage demands.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, households across Grand Rapids must pick up the tab for these necessary but expensive upgrades. At the beginning of 2008, the city had to hike up sewer rates by 16 percent to pay for some of the repairs.<sup>8</sup> City residents are not the only ones grappling with these higher utility costs. Fourteen suburban communities are

*“I have a little sticker shock relative to the numbers.”*

*– George Haga, supervisor of Ada Township, on Grand Rapids' water and sewer rate hike<sup>18</sup>*



connected to Grand Rapids' sewer system and have to pay the steep rates, which gave some suburban officials "a little sticker shock."<sup>9</sup> Absent a much-needed increase in federal support, families will see their sewer rates continue to climb.

EPA's most recent assessment of the Kalamazoo, Lower Grand, Maple, Muskegon, Thornapple and Upper Grand watersheds found 107 individual impairments to water quality, including fecal coliform bacteria, other pathogens and solid trash.<sup>10</sup>

**Across Michigan:** According to EPA, 24 percent of the state's river miles and 100 percent of lakes suffer from impaired water quality. Additionally, none of Michigan's Great Lakes shoreline fully supports fish consumption, and 99 percent of the state's wetlands are impaired.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, a report by the Natural Resources Defense Council shows nationwide beach closings and swimming advisories were at an all-time high in 2006. Michigan experienced 124 closures and advisories lasting six weeks or fewer in 2006; one was extended and three were permanent.<sup>12</sup>

Yet while the needs are apparent, the funding to keep our water clean and safe is drying up. Partisan divisions in the annual appropriations process keep resources from reaching our communities. While the amount that a single family pays for wastewater services has increased by about double the rate of inflation nationwide,<sup>13</sup> overall federal contributions to the State Revolving Fund have gone the other way. In Michigan, the state's clean water funding efforts have decreased by 47.8 percent since 1991 – nearly 66 percent when adjusted for inflation.<sup>14</sup>

Michigan's Intended Use Plan and Priority List shows the need for \$1.77 billion in wastewater infrastructure spending. The state, however, received only \$46 million from

*"Congress has to make protecting the Great Lakes a top priority. ... Cities have to be better environmental stewards of our most precious resource – water."*

*– Editorial board of the Grand Rapid Press<sup>21</sup>*

the federal government in 2007<sup>15</sup> – less than 1/38th its need. EPA's most recent Clean Watershed Needs survey determined that Michigan would need more than \$6 billion in infrastructure funding over the next 20 years.<sup>16</sup>

## **Time for a Federal Clean Water Trust Fund**

Meanwhile, Michigan's clean water infrastructure continues to deteriorate. Without increased funding, consumers will likely pay more in their sewer bills as communities struggle to meet their current and future needs.

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 Michigan 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](http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/water/americaswater/clearwaters).

*“This is an issue that could drain all others if it is not thought about seriously. Infrastructure is not something you do once. You have to maintain it and repair it. ... It is going to be a painful process because there is no free lunch here. This is going to be a serious economic demand on these communities.”*

*– Steve Allbee, a project director at  
EPA<sup>19</sup>*

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> “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](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/gapreport.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> “Implementation and Enforcement of the Combined Sewer Overflow Control Policy.” Office of Water, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, December 2001. Available at: [http://cfpub.epa.gov/npdes/cso/cpolicy\\_report.cfm](http://cfpub.epa.gov/npdes/cso/cpolicy_report.cfm)

<sup>3</sup> “Clean Watershed Needs Survey 2000, Report to Congress.” Office of Wastewater Management, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, August 2003. Available at: [www.epa.gov/owm/mtb/cwms/2000rtc/toc.htm](http://www.epa.gov/owm/mtb/cwms/2000rtc/toc.htm)

<sup>4</sup> “Face off,” *The Muskegon Chronicle*, April 29, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Judd, Terry. “GR says sewage overflows ending.” *The Muskegon Chronicle*, Nov. 30, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> “Face off,” *The Muskegon Chronicle*, April 29, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Sewage discharge violations, searchable database – Grand Rapids, Kent, Michigan, January 2003 – February 2008, Gannett News Service. Available at <http://data.gannettnewsservice.com/sewers/start7.php>.

<sup>8</sup> Harger, Jim. “Using less water? You’ll pay for that – GR commissioners uneasy over fixed water, sewer rates.” *The Grand Rapids Press*, Nov. 14, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Harger, Jim. “Water, sewer price jump on tap for GR customers – City raises rates for suburbs that hook up to its system.” *The Grand Rapids Press*, Nov. 10, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> “Surf Your Watershed.” Office of Water, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Available at: <http://cfpub.epa.gov/surf/locate/index.cfm>



<sup>11</sup> “2002 National Assessment Database.” U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Available at: [www.epa.gov/waters/305b/index\\_2002.html](http://www.epa.gov/waters/305b/index_2002.html)

<sup>12</sup> “Testing the Waters: A Guide to Water Quality at Vacation Beaches.” Natural Resources Defense Council, Washington, D.C., August 2007.

<sup>13</sup> “Residential Service Charges Outpace Inflation for Sixth Straight Year.” National Association of Clean Water Agencies, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> “Clean Water State Revolving Fund Allotments.” Office of Water, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Apr. 4, 2007. Available at [www.epa.gov/owm/cwfinance/cwsrf/cwsrfallots.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/owm/cwfinance/cwsrf/cwsrfallots.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> “State Revolving Fund Strategic Water Quality Initiatives Fund Final Intended Use Plan - Fiscal Year 2008.” Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, October 2007. Available at: [www.deq.state.mi.us/documents/deq-ess-cwFINALIUPO8.pdf](http://www.deq.state.mi.us/documents/deq-ess-cwFINALIUPO8.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> “Clean Watershed Needs Survey 2004, Report to Congress.” Office of Wastewater Management, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, January 2008. Available at: [www.epa.gov/owm/mtb/cwms/2004rtc/toc.htm](http://www.epa.gov/owm/mtb/cwms/2004rtc/toc.htm)

<sup>17</sup> Harger, Jim. “Water, sewer price jump on tap for GR customers – City raises rates for suburbs that hook up to its system.” *The Grand Rapids Press*, Nov. 10, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Harger, Jim. “Water, sewer price jump on tap for GR customers – City raises rates for suburbs that hook up to its system.” *The Grand Rapids Press*, Nov. 10, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Grant, Steve. “U.S. rivers at risk – aging treatment plants a problem.” *The Hartford Courant*, Jan. 5, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Judd, Terry. “GR says sewage overflows ending.” *The Muskegon Chronicle*, Nov. 30, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> “End sewage dumping,” *Grand Rapids Press*, July 16, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Fox, Amy. “What’s in the stormwater?” *WZZM13 ABC*, May 8, 2008.

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