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Old Water Pipes Not Just A Flint Issue

Flint's lead-tainted water has refocused attention on something usually buried in the minds of the public: The water supply, and how it's piped into homes.

"Potholes you can see when you hit them. You see a rusted-out bridge," said Pat **LINDEMANN**, drain commissioner of Ingham County, who referred to water pipes as the orphan child of infrastructure.

While much has been made of the state's roads and efforts to pump more funds into them, some experts have portrayed the aging water infrastructure across the state as underfunded and decades behind in repair and replacement.

Not only that, but some officials concede there are instances where local governments have no idea what condition their systems are in or even where they're located underground.

"We have a lot of old infrastructure under there and half the time -- most of the time -- we're clueless as to exactly where it is," Lindemann said, after describing an instance when the county discovered some wooden water pipes running beneath a section of Old Town in Lansing.

The American Society of Civil Engineers bestowed Michigan's roads with a "D" grade in a review of the state's infrastructure. Also receiving substandard grades were Michigan's drinking water (D) and wastewater (C).

This is despite the state being surrounded by some of the cleanest sources of water in the country, said James **CLIFT**, policy director of the Michigan Environmental Council (MEC).

Yet the issue is often the old infrastructure the water runs through.

"Literally, around the state, we have water supply systems that can range anywhere from 50 to 100 years old," said Mike **NYSTROM**, executive vice president of the Michigan Infrastructure and Transportation Association (MITA). "We can literally show you pictures of some of them, people would be horrified."

People have also been horrified about what they've seen coming out of their taps in Flint, attributed in part to the lead water pipes that run into homes from the main system (See "State Plan For Flint Water Includes More Testing, \$1 Million For Filters," 10/2/15).

Cities with older homes are likely to have these lead pipes still, said Gary **MEKJIAN**, director of public services for Farmington Hills, and also leader of the Michigan Municipal League's internal transportation and infrastructure committee.

Mekjian said some communities have removed many lead pipes from the public right-of-way, but like what happened in Flint, the lead pipes beneath some private properties haven't been addressed.

In many cases, the portion of the pipe underneath a person's property that runs into the house belongs to that person, but there are some who believe that burden should fall to the public utility to dig up and replace.

"I think it's part of the public utility," Clift said, adding that when it comes to electric utilities, no one is arguing the line from the telephone pole to the house is the landowner's responsibility to maintain.

The state plan issued last week in response to the Flint water fallout mentioned accelerating water system improvements to replace lead service lines.

One way the state may go about that is looking into rule or law changes for a fund that has typically been allowed for use only on municipal projects on the main water line, according to the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ).

Another issue is that governments are behind on evaluating the condition of their water pipes and infrastructure.

Clift referenced the "rudimentary" process by which Flint tracks homes with lead pipes, according to media reports, the city keeps that information on a series of 45,000 index cards.

"There's a lot of information about this stuff we don't even know," Lindemann said. "When they put it in the ground, a lot of this stuff wasn't even mapped. We don't even know exactly where it is."

As Mekjian said, a government can't manage something until it understands what it has, so that's step one.

"Once folks across the state are able to see how bad the systems are across the state, we look to have some statewide funding mechanism put in place," Nystrom said.

The state has tried to jump-start this review process for locals through its Stormwater, Asset Management and Wastewater (SAW) grant program, which originated from legislation signed into law in 2013.

These grants help locals develop asset management plans for wastewater and stormwater systems, among other uses, according to the DEQ.

But once that's established, next comes funding, which historically has struggled to keep up with the actual needs of these systems.

Several experts described a pattern that has followed the financial support of water infrastructure: Even from the time of the Civil War through the 20th century, the federal government paid for some big projects.

But when the locals gained control of these systems, they didn't implement the kind of rates that could support the upkeep long-term.

"The ability of a water system to levy the appropriate amount of fees so that it can . . . implement the appropriate capital improvements . . . is absolutely critical," Mekjian said. "You can't have politicians trying to keep water and sewer rates artificially low to meet their agenda. You just can't do it."

Sent from my iPhone