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Viewpoint: Fix procurement rules before fixing faulty pipes

Local officials should be open to consider a range of materials for water and sewer line repairs.

By Bruce Hollands

Winter and water main breaks are always painful reminders of the increasing costs for repairing and maintaining our nation's crumbling infrastructure at a time when we can least afford it. Over the next 20 years, municipalities will have to spend $3 trillion to $5 trillion to upgrade water and wastewater systems, according to Schenectady, N.Y., Mayor Brian Stratton, who also co-chairs the Washington-based U.S. Conference of Mayors Water Council. Renewing water and sewer pipes alone will require between $660 billion and $1.1 trillion over the same time.

Giving taxpayers the best bang for the buck should be the chief goal for mayors and local elected officials. According to a recent study of fiscally distressed states by the Pew Center on the States and the Public Policy Institute of California, residents are counting on their leaders to maximize returns on taxpayer dollars.

One good place to start would be to reform local procurement practices to include asset-management, lifecycle and performance criteria. Current bidding methods can be costly because they are often closed to other, more sustainable and proven technologies. Unfortunately, many utility operators continue to exclude widely used corrosion-proof technologies and materials like PVC, claiming the need to further study them, or relying on myths to avoid changing old habits. Yet, according to a 2002 congressional study, corrosion costs U.S. drinking water and wastewater systems over $50.7 billion annually, or more than $1 trillion over the next 20 years. It is also the leading cause of water-main breaks in North America, estimated at 255,000 breaks annually.

However, change is happening at local and federal levels. Myrtle Beach, Calif.; San Diego; Fargo, N.D.; and San Antonio are making utility bidding more competitive for different types of pipe. At the federal level, the Senate is considering clean water legislation (S. 1005) that, if amended, as some suggest, would include specifications to increase performance and improve the durability of piping systems. The result would be reduced break rates and operating costs, as well as increased energy efficiency.

We can no longer continue ignoring this problem and wasting taxpayer dollars by allowing outmoded procurement rules to go unchallenged. Over a trillion dollars could be saved by eliminating corrosion and by allowing the free market to choose the best and most cost-effective products available for piping systems.

Much more, however, needs to be done. With many new fiscally minded lawmakers in Washington and increasingly watchful taxpayers, it is high time we cleaned up our act. If we don't start now, we'll face another long, cold winter of water main breaks and wasted public resources.

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