Aging water infrastructure could represent a looming fiscal crisis for taxpayers

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Water is the single-biggest infrastructure liability American cities face, as the Environmental Protection Agency estimates a need for $600 billion to be spent over the next 20 years to meet essential drinking and wastewater needs. Here in the District of Columbia, some of our water pipes date all the way back to the Civil War.

U.S. cities and towns are in greater fiscal peril than many of them even realize, as a broken model of development has turned their future balance sheets upside down. As city planner and engineer Charles Marohn has shown, the dispersed settlement pattern that the federal government encouraged for decades through the highway bill and other programs is too often simply unable to provide a tax base capable of supporting the capital investment and ongoing maintenance associated with publicly provided road and utility services. The time is long past to start allowing our local governments to put their fiscal house in order without the federal government continuing to worsen the problem.

Underground infrastructure in particular is among the costliest maintenance a local government confronts, and every dollar that can be saved underground gives localities a little more time to restore their fiscal health. Only an on-the-ground engineer will know the best material to use for any given project in any given soil. But those engineers should be empowered to consider their full range of options, and encouraged to
protect the public purse they are entrusted with. When Compass Point Strategies President Darren Beason wrote in The Hill to warn against “an effort to deny those professionals the ability to use their knowledge to select the most appropriate material for the job,” he is actually warning against the opening of infrastructure investment to full competition.

Saving taxpayer money unfortunately isn’t often enough allowed to be a top priority for decision-makers, as a host of outdated procurement laws keep local engineers tied to the technologies of the 1950s. The advent of lightweight, corrosion-proof materials has been a game-changer for local water spending, and their use has spread throughout the country. The University of Utah’s Buried Structures Laboratory has investigated various PVC pipes after decades of use, and found the long-buried and intensively used pipes often meet the standards of brand-new materials.

As Congress and the president weigh our country’s infrastructure needs over the course of the next year, they should not be tempted by glittering new construction at the cost of making sound, fiscally sustainable investments in the out-of-sight infrastructure that keeps our 21st century lifestyles from crashing back to the days before running water. Even as they consider what investments will open new opportunities in the future, they should first look to maintain the roads and pipes that we use every day. As the $600 billion water bill hangs over our cities’ futures, the investment decisions that are made over the next several years will determine whether the public-pension crisis that has so rocked many states and cities will be eclipsed by a pipes crisis.

There are ongoing great advances in the material sciences. For example, parking lots and pavement can now be built to infiltrate water directly through the ground, instead of shunting rain straight into the sewers for expensive stormwater treatment. The years to come likely will see even more breakthroughs that increase our problem-solving flexibility. Now is not the time to double-down on 50-year-old best practices. Procurement should be tailored to the task at hand, and engineers should be empowered to choose the best tool for the job at the best price for taxpayers.

Every level of government, including the federal government, should look to understand how its laws and regulations inflate costs or contain them, and whether they are open to innovation or turn away from it. Opening water infrastructure to performance-based bidding does not hamstring local decisionmaking. It offers new options for those preparing to build our underground future.

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