Like so many other people across the nation, I was horrified by the water contamination crisis that struck Flint, Michigan. As an elected official who bears direct responsibility for maintaining the integrity of my city’s drinking water system, I ask myself: What can be done to keep this from happening in my community?

Flint has taught us that we cannot be complacent. Providing clean and affordable drinking water requires diligence that nips problems in the bud as soon as they are spotted, as well as the foresight to upgrade water systems before they deteriorate to the point that they threaten public health.

Underground pipes account for 60 percent of the cost of maintaining our water systems. It is here that we need to focus our attention and our resources, because we have thousands of miles of leaking, corroded, underground iron water pipes that if not replaced in a timely fashion will trigger the next Flint disaster in an unsuspecting community.

The American Society of Civil Engineers recently released its 2017 Infrastructure Report Card, which gave the nation’s drinking water infrastructure a grade of “D.” This will come as no surprise to municipal officials who for years have been coping with water main breaks and the ever-present threat that leaking underground pipes will provide pathways for waterborne diseases to be transmitted to our homes and businesses.

Make no mistake — raising a water infrastructure grade of “D” to an “A” is going to cost a lot of money. This is why it is crucial that local officials make every effort to ensure their water systems can take advantage of innovative technologies and materials that provide cost-effective and long-lasting solutions to the challenges facing our water and waste systems.

Unfortunately, many jurisdictions are their own worst enemy when it comes to upgrading their underground water pipes. They are saddled with antiquated procurement specifications that limit the choices engineers can make in selecting piping materials that best suit local needs. By not allowing competitive bidding to decide the future of their water systems, these jurisdictions are doing a grave disservice to ratepayers and taxpayers.

When there is competition, costs go down, enabling the more rapid rehabilitation of life-sustaining water systems. Burton, Michigan—right next door to Flint—has opened up its underground pipe procurement to competitive bidding, and other jurisdictions in surrounding Genesee County are following suit. Similarly, legislation promoting competitive bidding on state-funded underground pipe projects is pending in Ohio, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Michigan.

A 2013 U.S. Conference of Mayors report on underground water infrastructure concluded, “Closed procurement/processes lead to unnecessary costs, and may diminish the public’s confidence in a local government’s ability to provide cost-effective services.”

While open competition in piping materials is a very obtainable goal for local lawmakers, oftentimes they run up against department heads stuck on preserving the status quo due to a fear of change. This type of resistance sometimes requires local officials to take matters into their own hands and force regulators to open their specifications to include a variety of piping materials. Model policy written by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), “The Open and Fair Competition Resolution for Municipal [or Local] Water and Wastewater Projects” can be adopted by city and county officials so they can give firm direction to staff.

Open and fair competition is a win-win for taxpayers that will drive down costs of overall underground infrastructure.

Give us the tools, and we can get the job done.

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