There has been a lot of talk about the poor state of America's infrastructure and the urgent need for action to fix it — but are we looking in the right places?

The American Society of Civil Engineers recently gave the nation's infrastructure a grade of “D+” (even that might be too generous), cautioning Americans that roughly $4.6 trillion will need to be spent over the next eight years to bring our nation's infrastructure up to acceptable levels. But finding nearly $500 billion a year in an era of significant budget reductions is unlikely. That's why I believe it's time to look for smarter, cost-effective solutions at all levels of government to help fix this country's ailing infrastructure.

Where do we begin?

First, we should understand that our infrastructure needs go beyond roads and bridges. Despite the critical role water plays in our daily life, many of the pipes that deliver water were installed decades ago, and are now corroding, breaking or no longer safe. Unfortunately, Michigan residents understand the dangers and consequences of neglected water systems all too well, after having to endure the tragic effects of a crumbling underground infrastructure for quite some time.

We deserve better.

After years of facing these challenges in the Michigan Legislature, I decided to take a proactive approach to addressing our state's water infrastructure problems. One of the things we are doing is updating the antiquated regulations that restrict many cities and counties from being able to choose the best option from a wide array of materials when upgrading water systems. In many cases, these regulations force project engineers to use only one predetermined type of material. These overly bureaucratic, nonsensical rules take the decision-making powers away from the experts who are in the best position to select the best and most cost-effective material for the job. I introduced SB 157, the Public Works Quality Materials Procurement Act, to ensure a level playing field so that all materials could compete fairly, in an open process that would restore choice.

The bill is simple in what it does — it allows project engineers to consider all materials and select the option that works best for their project. Unlike current restrictions, the legislation is not material-specific and gives no preference to any single pipe material. In fact, the bill states that it “does not limit the professional judgment of the project's engineer to select any acceptable pipe and piping materials that meet the requirements of the public works project.” With this bill, control will remain firmly with the local engineers who are planning and implementing these projects.

In addition to restoring choice, the proposed legislation will provide other benefits. For example, although the bill does not require the automatic selection of the lowest bid, SB 157 will also help lower costs because it will allow for competition between materials. A study by BCC Research, which examined how open competition could impact water projects in Michigan, found that it would result in potential cost savings of 27 to 34 percent, regardless of which material is chosen. That translates to a total cost savings of $114,154 per mile of pipe, which could be used to fund other projects or provide relief to taxpayers.

Michigan's infrastructure problems might be distinct, but they are far from unique. Many other states are struggling with water issues while being saddled with the same regulations that severely limit their options for finding a solution to their problem. The National Taxpayers Union has estimated that open competition could save taxpayers and ratepayers $371 billion nationwide.

Passing SB 157 would help people in my state have access to a safe, clean, and cost-effective water supply. By adopting policies that promote open competition, lawmakers could empower engineers across the country to make the best choice for their community with the added benefit of saving government resources and taxpayer dollars.

Sen. Rick Jones has represented the 24th Senate District of Michigan since 2010. He serves as the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee and vice-chair of the Military and Veterans Affairs and Homeland Security Committee. Prior to his service in the Senate, he represented the 71st House District and served as the sheriff of Eaton County.