As several communities across Ohio struggle with water quality concerns, it is clear that our state’s crumbling and corroded clean-water pipe infrastructure needs significant upgrades.

Even as the legislature and the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency work to eliminate instances of lead contamination in drinking water and fight toxic algae in lakes, rivers and streams, other long-term issues remain. There are troubling reports of water mains breaking across Ohio. More than 93,000 breaks occurred between Columbus and Portsmouth from 2000 to 2006 alone. Leaking and bursting water mains are costly, from fixing or replacing pipe, to the loss of revenue from businesses affected by repairs or flooding, to the loss of property and income for local residents. The consequences from the failure of these aging systems are widely felt.

The U.S. EPA has projected it will cost more than $12 billion over the next two decades to upgrade water infrastructure in Ohio. Most of the infrastructure-related money -- about $8 billion -- will be needed for the network of pipes that distribute water. An additional $2 billion is needed for water-treatment projects, and another $1 billion for water-storage projects. Much of the funding for these projects will come from state coffers.

House Bill 214, currently being deliberated in the Ohio House, addresses lingering water infrastructure concerns by injecting free-market and open competition principles to local drinking-water pipe-overhaul projects.

As strange as it might seem, some local ordinances limit materials municipalities can use in water infrastructure projects by allowing only one material to be considered in public bids. However, many other materials meet or exceed the recommended public health, safety and engineering specifications for clean-water delivery systems. By limiting the number of competing materials, these municipalities dig greater holes of material-cost debt for taxpayers without any additional benefits to health or safety.

A recent study by the leading market-research firm BCC Research found that Ohio counties that limited project bids to old-fashion ductile iron pipes -- to the exclusion of other safe and durable materials -- increased the project material costs by nearly 35 percent. According to the study, these exclusionary bidding practices have cost local taxpayers nearly $100,000 more per mile of pipe, without any additional water quality or safety benefits.

HB 214 removes these anti-competitive and arbitrary barriers to procurement and gives local governments the ability to receive project bids that include new and advanced drinking-water pipe materials. It also provides local governments a great deal of flexibility when putting expensive infrastructure projects up for bid.

HB 214’s common-sense approach to overhauling Ohio’s water infrastructure is both timely and necessary. The legislation will ensure taxpayers receive the best deal for the safest and most advanced water delivery infrastructure systems available.

The currently exclusionary system in place only benefits those who make and sell the old-style iron pipe systems. Cash-strapped local governments and the taxpayers they serve deserve better.

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