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GUEST COLUMN: Competitive bidding solves Rome's water problems

ROME'S AGING, corroded underground water pipes are crumbling beneath the feet of the city's residents. Water main breaks are an inconvenience for businesses and commuters alike, and the loss of water is paid for by taxpayers and ratepayers.

Corroding iron water pipes make them vulnerable to breaks and to contamination from unhealthy viruses and bacteria that can enter drinking water. Broken water mains lead to boil-water alerts, and lost work time for commuters stuck in traffic as water mains are repaired.

Beyond those inconveniences, the financial costs are staggeringly high as Rome must foot the bill for millions of dollars in the coming decade.

Public officials are under pressure to deliver services in a cost-effective way, but their efforts are complicated by a flagging national economy, abandoned homes and weak property tax revenues.

One fact remains, though, Rome must find a way to maintain and repair its water service at the lowest possible cost. To do this, city water planners must change the way they do business. Typically, politics rewards contracts to the well-connected which stifles innovation, enriches the contractors, and does nothing to drive down costs.

Change the procurement process, however, and you change a lot of what ails the city water system.

STUDIES ABOUND on the mechanics of building and repairing water distribution systems, however, a recent study entitled, *Fixing America's Crumbling Underground Water Infrastructure: Com-*

petitive Bidding Offers A Way Out — by Dr. Bonner Cohen of the Competitive Enterprise Institute, pointedly observes that “outdated and prohibitive local procurement policies ... discriminate against the use of innovative, more cost-effective material” In short, Rome, has simply failed to give the heave-ho to old procurement policies that stifle innovation and inflate costs.

Competitive bidding allows private businesses to compete equally for city contracts while encouraging the use of better materials and newer technologies such as corrosion-resistant PVC pipes. PVC, for instance, is 70 percent cheaper to use, has a significantly lower failure rate than iron pipes and is less labor intensive.

Competitive bidding saved the cities of Calgary and Edmonton, Canada over \$5 million when they rebuilt parts of their water systems.

And Indianapolis, Indiana's Mayor Gregory Ballard, when confronted with mounting unfunded mandates, population growth and rapidly increasing costs for water infrastructure, re-thought his city's materials procurement system to one that emphasizes competitive bids. With the newer procurement system Indianapolis has replaced old iron pipes with non-corrosive and low maintenance materials like PVC.

NEW PVC PIPES make-up 28 percent of the total water distribution system in Indianapolis with 2.5 times lower failure rate than traditional iron pipes.

It's clear that civic leaders in Canada and Indianapolis have embraced changes to their procurement systems for water

infrastructure to minimize repair costs which leads them to wisely spend money in a responsible manner. Taxpayers benefit with cleaner and safer drinking water, fewer repairs to the water system and less time stuck in traffic as governments keep-up with changes in technology. Rome can learn a great deal from Canada and Indianapolis in how it buys new materials.

But, if Canada and Indianapolis are too far to look, Rome's neighbors of Cobb, DeKalb, Gwinnett and Henry counties and the city of Conyers have all embraced affordable materials to efficiently deliver water for their residents and businesses alike.

Even our federal government understands that the old ways of doing business must be changed. The federal Rural Utilities Service encourages small and rural communities to use competitive bids to leverage scarce dollars to get more bang for their buck.

Finally, if city leaders remain reluctant to usher in innovation through competitive bids, then maybe the new state law requiring water conservation audits will force Rome lawmakers to change its procurement system to meet water conservation goals instead.

IT ONLY MAKES SENSE that the city should improve its water and procurement system in a manner that fosters innovation and “lets the best technology win.”

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