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Edgens: A Fix For Aging Water Lines

By Jeff Edgens

Municipal water lines in North Georgia are crumbling beneath residents' feet. Aging iron pipes are breaking with greater frequency and inconveniencing businesses and commuters with expensive repairs.

Underground iron pipes comprise a large portion of water infrastructure, but these pipes corrode and often break, leaving them vulnerable to contamination from unhealthy viruses and bacteria.

Broken water mains also lead to boil-water alerts and lost work time.

Beyond those inconveniences, the financial costs are staggeringly high, as cities must foot the bill for millions of dollars in water pipe replacement and repair.

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, these North Georgia communities must find a way to maintain and repair their water services at the lowest cost possible.

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 city water systems.

A recent study by the Competitive Enterprise Institute, titled "Fixing America's Crumbling Underground Water Infrastructure," pointedly observes that "outdated and prohibitive local procurement policies ... discriminate against the use of innovative, more cost-effective material."

In short, when a municipality embraces competitive bidding it 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.

When Dalton Utility officials visited Indianapolis, they learned how, facing financial constraints, Indianapolis rethought its procurement system and replaced its old iron pipes with corrosion-resistant PVC materials.

New PVC pipes make up 28 percent of Indianapolis' total water distribution system with a 2.5 times lower failure rate than traditional iron pipes.

Dalton is a perfect example of how to minimize pipe corrosion in the system while reducing costs for taxpayers. Dalton Utilities accepted a \$19.8 million bid, which came in \$5 million

below the next closest bidder, for the purpose of replacing corroded iron pipes with noncorrosive PVC pipes.

The project was expected to take four years to complete, but competitive bidding encouraged innovative techniques that shaved three years off the expected time of project completion. Saving three years on the project allowed the city to collect water revenue earlier than anticipated, and Dalton Utilities added 6,000 customers.

Both Indianapolis and Dalton clearly show that when a municipality embraces changes to its procurement and competitive bidding process, it can replace aging water infrastructure with a newer system at less cost to taxpayers.

Even our federal government understands that the old ways of doing business must change, and the Rural Utilities Service encourages small towns and rural communities to switch to a competitive bidding process.

When North Georgia towns use fair and open competitive bidding, it drives down costs, benefits the taxpayer and "lets the best technology win."

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