

A cheaper way to fix Baltimore's leaky pipes

The city should join others that now use PVC rather than iron

By *Marta H. Mossburg*

Every year residents of Baltimore witness spectacular water main breaks that temporarily shutter businesses, ruin homes and cars and snarl traffic.

In April of 2009, a massive break downtown forced thousands of workers home and flooded a 32-square block area of the city with 2 feet of water. At the time, Downtown Partnership President Kirby Fowler told *The Sun* that one intersection “looked like the edge of the ocean tides where you can ride boogie boards and slide along the water’s edge.”

The most recent big break happened at Light Street earlier this month, when a 20-inch main from 1890 burst at rush hour. It is still under repair. As if that wasn’t enough, a large sinkhole related to a 1901 storm drain opened up near Johns Hopkins Hospital last week. Public works crews rove the city fixing two to three smaller main breaks every day. They must feel like so many little Dutch boys plugging the dyke with their fingers. And they are, since the city loses 20 percent of its water each year to leaks.

It’s not that far-fetched to imagine the Grand Prix cancelled due to a 120-year old pipe bursting.

But the main issue is the replacement price tag. “Given the high cost of maintaining and upgrading decaying water systems, experts estimate that water and sewer bills will eventually grow to nearly 5 percent of median household income, which could mean a 200 to 300 percent rise in water utility rates above today’s levels,” Bonner Cohen wrote in his April 2012 report, “Fixing

America’s Crumbling Underground Water Infrastructure.”

Mr. Cohen, a senior fellow at the Washington-based National Center for Public Policy Research, said cities like Baltimore that are losing population are in worse shape than others because a smaller number of people will have to shoulder the costs of upgrades. Those higher rates, in turn, could deter people and businesses from moving to the city, he added. City rates just went up again for the fourth straight year, this time by 9 percent, and they will likely keep going up to pay for needed repairs, said Kurt Kocher, a Department of Public Works spokesman. They come as the city just doubled the bottle tax to pay for fixing schools and faces steadily increasing costs for pensions and health care for retirees, two issues that have pushed a growing number of California cities into bankruptcy.

Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake testified before Congress earlier this year that “Local governments cannot carry the financial burden [of repairs to water infrastructure] by themselves,” and she asked for “meaningful” help from the federal government. The city estimates it needs \$1 billion to fix the sewer lines alone. Almost comically, no money from the \$831 billion stimulus bill went to repairing Baltimore’s water infrastructure. As noted above, this city has plenty of “shovel ready” projects.

With the state facing another budget deficit and the federal government mired in debt, it’s not likely Baltimore will get anything close to “meaningful” amounts

of outside money to fix a system largely in place when H.L. Mencken was writing.

What it can do is start replacing iron pipes with PVC, however. Mr. Kocher said he was unsure whether PVC would be better than iron, but it is cheaper to install and maintain, doesn’t corrode and lasts longer.

Jennifer Hosterman, mayor of Pleasanton, Calif., and co-chair of the Mayors Water Council, wrote recently that in her city PVC has turned out to be about 70 percent cheaper than ductile iron because not only is the initial cost smaller, it is lighter and less expensive to install and does not require corrosion protection. Many cities, including San Diego, Calif., Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minn. and Palm Beach, Fla. are turning to PVC. Baltimore needs to remove any procurement policies that prevent it from being used.

Just because the city has always done things a certain way doesn’t mean it has to keep doing them that way, especially when the alternative is less expensive and more reliable. PVC can save Baltimore ratepayers money and stop the constant and expensive disruptions to service.

Marta H. Mossburg is a senior fellow at the Maryland Public Policy Institute and a fellow at the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity. Her column appears regularly in The Baltimore Sun. Her email is marta@martamossborg.com.