AN AGENDA FOR CHANGE for New Jersey’s Urban Water Infrastructure

Twenty-one participants representing diverse perspectives met in Jersey City on May 20–21, 2014, to build consensus on an Agenda for Change to catalyze the transformation of New Jersey’s urban water infrastructure (water supply, wastewater and stormwater). The group established Guiding Principles for improving urban water infrastructure, identified the Driver for Action and recommended a set of Action Steps to stimulate progress.

The meeting was convened by three organizations:

New Jersey Future,
The Johnson Foundation at Wingspread and the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation.
AN AGENDA FOR CHANGE FOR NEW JERSEY’S WATER INFRASTRUCTURE

GUIDING PRINCIPLES
A water infrastructure crisis looms in 21 of New Jersey’s oldest and all of its largest cities that comprise nearly a fifth of the state’s population and are projected to absorb much of its future growth. Aging and degraded water supply, wastewater and stormwater infrastructure threaten to disrupt daily life, commerce and industry in these communities. To stave off severe crisis, New Jersey’s cities for prosperous futures, public, private and nongovernmental partners need to collaborate to ensure the necessary investments are made to design, construct and maintain 21st century water infrastructure that:

Strengthens Cities. Protects public health and the environment and enhances the attractiveness, livability and safety of cities, while making them more resilient to extreme weather events and natural disasters.

Enables Economic Growth. Reliably and efficiently delivers safe and adequate drinking water, wastewater and stormwater management services that meet the needs of city residents and businesses today and into the future.

Leverages Modern Practices. Employs state-of-the-art technologies and best management practices that generate multiple benefits — economic (cost savings, job creation, new businesses), environmental (improved water quality), and social (better quality of life).

Reduces Flooding and Energy Use. Reduces localized flooding from storms, water-main breaks and sewer overflows, and enhances energy efficiency to reduce both water utility costs and air pollution.

Draws on Multiple Funding Sources and Maintains Affordability. Establishes adequate, sustainable funding streams to support improved water infrastructure and services while ensuring affordable rates over time for city residents and businesses.

THE DRIVER FOR ACTION
While many components of New Jersey’s urban water infrastructure are past their useful lives and inadequately maintained, the most immediate driver for action is the federal and state regulatory requirement that 21 cities must control combined sewer overflows (CSOs) — a problem caused by aging combined (sanitary and stormwater) sewer systems and exacerbated by increasingly intense rainfall events. In late 2014, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) was slated to issue mandatory control permits requiring the responsible cities and utility authorities to develop, adopt and implement the CSO Long-Term Control Plans (LTCPs). The NJDEP has proposed a three-year time frame, but will consider a longer time frame for parties that collaborate across jurisdictions on comprehensive plans. This permit process cannot be avoided, and it can be leveraged to bring attention not only to urban water infrastructure problems in general.

While New Jersey is behind most other states in requiring the development and implementation of CSO LTCPs, the timing of the forthcoming permits presents a significant opportunity for the state’s urban areas to learn from and adapt CSO control strategies implemented in cities across the country. New Jersey’s cities can draw on proven approaches that meet regulatory requirements for clean water while generating additional benefits, including improved public health and environmental quality, enhanced resilience to extreme weather events, new local jobs, greater private investment and revitalized communities. On the other hand, cities that fail to comply with the permits will be vulnerable to lawsuits and ultimately federal court sanctions that impose a specific course of action and may eliminate the opportunity to achieve broader community improvement goals.

INT INTEGRATED WATER INFRASTRUCTURE SOLUTIONS FOR SUSAINABLE CITIES

Recommended Action Steps
Participants agreed that the looming regulatory mandate for CSO LTCPs presents an opportunity to focus attention on the full array of urban water infrastructure challenges. The group coalesced around the following recommended Action Steps, which it believes can catalyze the transformation of urban water infrastructure throughout the state.

Educate and Raise Awareness. Key stakeholders should design and implement a multi-faceted education and outreach program to raise awareness regarding the importance of clean water and the multiple benefits that sustainable water infrastructure solutions can generate for cities, surrounding communities and the state as a whole. A key objective of such a program should be to identify and engage champions at the state and local levels. Target audiences include elected and appointed leaders, utility executives and professional staff, state and local agency personnel, ratepayers, the business community and schoolchildren. Academic institutions and community-based organizations such as environmental commissions, green teams, faith-based institutions and delivering educational messages and information to target audiences, as can decision-support tools that illustrate the costs and benefits of urban water infrastructure projects, including the costs of inaction.

Optimize Existing Systems and Implement Asset Management. Before seeking ratepayer support for investment in major capital improvements, water utilities and departments should take aggressive action to optimize the efficiency and effectiveness of their existing systems and business practices. In addition, these entities should develop and implement asset management plans that sustain efficiency over time. Taking these foundational steps in a visible and transparent manner, and demonstrating the associated cost savings, will help utilities and departments build trust with ratepayers and establish credibility to pursue necessary but costly infrastructure upgrades.

Diversify Funding Sources. In addition to local and state bonds, public and private agencies, local business, state and federal agencies, water utilities and departments, and state and local agencies, planners, consultants and elected officials.

Leverage Early Successes To Generate Political Support. Cities and water utilities and departments seeking state and local-level political support for innovative approaches to urban water infrastructure improvements should focus on achieving early successes with highly visible projects. Because green infrastructure solutions have the potential to control some of the flows that cause CSOs at the lowest cost with multiple benefits, municipalities should take a “green first” approach, including mapping strategic locations for green infrastructure projects, making local policy changes that facilitate implementation and building demonstration projects that make neighborhood benefits tangible. To encourage collaboration, the NJDEP, U.S. EPA, universities and others could provide technical support for project design and implementation. In many situations, more conventional engineering solutions or “gray” infrastructure will be necessary also. Regardless, state and local leaders should be engaged in the planning and rollout of new water infrastructure projects, which will help build broad community support.

Notes:
2. Green infrastructure involves designs and systems that mimic nature via integrative systems that capture and equips water at the property or neighborhood scale to reduce flooding and prevent runoff from entering combined sewers or municipal stormwater sewers.
Meeting Participants

Honorary Co-Chairs

James Florio
Governor of New Jersey, 1990-1994
Founding Partner
Florio Perrucci Steinhardt & Fader

Christine Todd Whitman
Governor of New Jersey, 1994-2001
Founder
Whitman Strategy Group

Participants

The following participants represented themselves and agreed to support the outcomes presented in the Agenda for Change as individuals.

Andrea Hall Adebowale
Acting Director
Department of Water & Sewer Utilities
City of Newark, New Jersey

Philip Beachem
President
New Jersey Alliance for Action

Michele Byers
Executive Director
New Jersey Conservation Foundation

Ed Clerico
President
Natural Systems Utilities

Robert Cotter
Director, Division of City Planning
City of Jersey City, New Jersey

Dennis Doll
Chairman, President and Chief Executive Officer
Middlesex Water Company

Kevil Duhon
Assistant Executive Director
New Jersey Senate Democratic Office

Kim Gaddy
Environmental Justice Organizer
Clean Water Fund

Jennifer Gonzalez
Environmental/Transportation Planner
The Louis Berger Group

Andrew Hendry
President
New Jersey Utilities Association

Robert Iacullo
Executive Vice President
United Water

Jane Kenny
Former Region II Administrator
U.S. EPA
Trustee
New Jersey Future
Managing Partner
Whitman Strategy Group

Andrew Kricun
Executive Director and Chief Engineer
Camden County Municipal Utility Authority

Larry Levine
Senior Attorney, Water Program
Natural Resources Defense Council

Debbie Mans
Executive Director
NY/NJ Baykeeper

Stephen Marks
Assistant Business Administrator
Office of the Business Administrator
City of Hoboken, New Jersey

Mark Mauriello
Director of Environmental Affairs and Planning
Edgewood Properties

Christopher Obropta
Extension Specialist in Water Resources
Rutgers Cooperative Extension

Anthony Perno
Chief Executive Officer
Coopers Ferry Partnership

Michael Urbanski
Superintendent of Plant Operations
Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission

Daniel J. Van Abs
Associate Research Professor
Department of Human Ecology
Rutgers University

Alan Weinberg
Vice President of Planning and Policy
New Jersey Community Development Corporation

State and Federal Government Participants

The following state and federal department and agency representatives took part in the meeting to help inform the discussions. Their participation does not constitute individual or organizational endorsement of the recommendations presented in the Agenda for Change, or any other products from the meeting:

Joan Matthews
Director, Clean Water Division
U.S. EPA Region II

Michele Putnam
Director, Division of Water Quality
New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection

David Zimmer
Executive Director
New Jersey Environmental Infrastructure Trust

New Jersey Future is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that promotes responsible land use policies. The Johnson Foundation at Wingspread is a catalyst for positive and lasting change leading to healthier environments and communities and the convener of the Charting New Waters initiative. The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation supports leadership, innovation and collaboration for a better New Jersey. For more information, please visit www.njfuture.org/water.