

## **NJ SPOTLIGHT**

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# **A Year One Clean Water Agenda for New Jersey**

**By Chris Sturm**  
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Here in New Jersey we watched in horror two years ago as the Flint, MI, water crisis unfolded — a crisis that will likely affect the health of Flint residents for years to come. As Michigan continues to confront its tragic water-system failings, most New Jerseyans are unaware that our state is approaching its own clean-water crisis. Although many systems are well managed, too often aging and inadequate drinking water, sewer, and stormwater systems pose a daily threat to health and commerce in cities and towns across the state. Century-old water mains are weak and obsolete, lead pipes contaminate drinking water in schools, and dysfunctional wastewater systems combine raw sewage with rainwater and discharge the mix into local rivers.

We are in urgent need of state-level leadership to address these serious risks. Long overdue investments in our water infrastructure would help New Jersey avoid a potential public-health crisis while expanding economic opportunity and enhancing the environment. We are hopeful that Gov.-elect Phil Murphy will immediately assume the visible leadership needed to protect our most vulnerable communities and position New Jersey as a national model for clean water. Here are some areas on which he should focus first:

**Aging infrastructure and combined sewer overflows:** While New Jersey's cities are becoming the state's economic growth engine, they are plagued by aging, deteriorating water systems, and many have a significant problem with combined-sewer overflows. In addition, water-main breaks, lead contamination, loss of water through leaky pipes, and chronic local flooding are all water infrastructure challenges that affect both small towns and big cities. Square-mile Hoboken had 20 water-main breaks in 2016 alone, increasing traffic, lengthening commutes, hurting businesses, and frustrating residents who had to boil water. An estimated 130 million gallons of treated drinking water are being lost each day across New Jersey due to leaking pipes. Fixing these pipes could save utilities \$10 million per year and reduce the need to build new reservoirs. The state should partner with local officials to educate communities about the serious costs of inaction on water system updates and improvements, and work with towns in seeking opportunities for cost-effective approaches that advance city revitalization efforts.

**Lead in drinking water:** Despite the well-known risks of lead exposure, more than 300 New Jersey schools across the state tested positive for lead in their drinking

water prior to the start of the current school year. While these schools are required to take measures to keep students safe, the state needs to address this very real public-health risk on a larger scale. To this end, New Jersey should perform and publish a statewide assessment of lead in school drinking water that identifies the extent of each district's problem and the associated needs for assistance with asset management and capital financing. More comprehensive and standardized data collection and reporting will help to ensure transparency at all levels and help to determine an appropriate response to the problem.

**Green infrastructure and stormwater utilities:** Investing in innovative solutions can save money while providing health, energy, air quality, economic, and climate-related benefits. To this end, the state should update stormwater regulations to drive and reward green infrastructure techniques in development and redevelopment projects. These techniques, like green roofs and rain gardens, mimic nature by capturing stormwater and allowing it to seep into the ground where it falls so it can be reused, rather than having it flow into already stressed underground sewer and storm pipes. The state should also permit local governments to create stormwater utilities that allow for focused stormwater management and a sustainable revenue stream.

**Public education:** Polls show residents of New Jersey care about the quality of their water. A high-profile "Clean Water Campaign" would increase awareness of current clean-water risks and the root cause: aging infrastructure. The appointment of a "water czar" reporting to the governor would help ensure collaboration among relevant state agencies as well as with the privately owned and government-owned utilities, to implement the most cost-effective solutions for all our communities and businesses.

**Ensuring modernization and affordability:** New Jersey urgently needs a more innovative, comprehensive approach to modernizing our aging water systems. This could include more technical assistance and funding for capital improvements, especially for utilities facing new state requirements for planning and investment, and better training for those responsible for managing our water systems. Big changes can incur costs, so the state must take steps to ensure water and sewer services are affordable to all.

An array of organizations is ready to partner with the governor-elect. The "Year One Clean Water Agenda" has a broad support, from environmental advocates to industry to community development associations to utilities and municipalities, and offers the next governor seven steps he can take to champion the modernization of our inadequate drinking, wastewater, and stormwater systems.

It's time for New Jersey to become a leader once again in protecting our residents and our economy through smart, innovative investments in the water systems that allow our communities and our people to thrive.

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