



TESTIMONY

## Testimony Water Infrastructure Issues

June 22, 2020

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Dear Assemblyman Karabinchak and members of the Committee,

New Jersey Future is a nonprofit organization that believes New Jersey can be a great place to live with a prosperous, fair economy; thriving communities; and a healthy environment if smart decisions are made about what and where to build and the supporting infrastructure.. That's why we promote policies for cost-effective, sustainable water systems in New Jersey. Everyone in New Jersey should have access to safe, clean drinking water, streets free from flooding, and clean waterways. We are delighted to work with your committee to further that goal.

New Jersey Future works closely with many water stakeholders through the Jersey Water Works collaborative. We agree with your focus on lead in water, asset management and access to clean drinking water as a societal and environmental justice issue.

Today I will highlight the most important immediate opportunities to address these topics:

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of clean water to maintaining health. Whether to wash hands to reduce the spread of germs or to stay hydrated while social distancing, access to safe, reliable, and affordable water is essential. Like so many other critical services today, access to clean water is an issue of equity. More than [27 million](#) Americans today are served by water systems violating health-based standards established in the [Safe Drinking Water Act](#). Low income communities and communities of color are impacted hardest due to decades of underinvestment in safe and reliable water infrastructure and to a lack of affordability.

As we move toward reopening and recovery, the government response to COVID-19 must assure a clean water future for all communities in New Jersey, and doing so can grow New Jersey's economy and create thousands of much-needed jobs.

The federal government is exploring new funding for water infrastructure through traditional water infrastructure legislation and a COVID stimulus package. New Jersey leaders have also called for new water spending. To ensure this water spending delivers not only jobs but also better health outcomes and greater efficiencies in our most vulnerable communities, New Jersey should enact smart reforms that have been teed up over the last few years:

**Lead service line replacement.**

While the lead in drinking water affects people throughout the state, communities of color and lower-income communities are disproportionately impacted by lead exposure. This exposure is exacerbated by stay-at-home orders keeping children home from school and in contact with lead hazards for longer periods of time. However, we can virtually eliminate the risks of lead exposure within ten years using comprehensive strategies such as those detailed in the [Jersey Water Works Lead in Drinking Water Task Force report](#). Legislation mandating lead service line replacement and the creation of lead service line inventories (A1262) has already been introduced and, with some changes to the amount of funds eligible for rate recovery, should be prioritized. We are finalizing some amendments that would allow this work to get started even if there is not a new subsidy program. The work to replace lead service lines will both improve health outcomes and create jobs that can be conducted safely.

**Water integrity and security.**

Leaky underground drinking water pipes in New Jersey lose an estimated 130 million gallons of treated drinking water each day, squandering precious natural water supplies and energy used in the treatment process. It's time to enact amendments to the Water Quality Accountability Act to ensure that all of our water systems, large and small, are investing proactively in fixes like these that lower long-term costs. The Senate recently passed S647, which amends the Water Quality Accountability Act to improve the condition of drinking water systems through proactive investment, reporting on key metrics, and transparency for consumers. Other important components of this bill include the detailed requirements for asset management, strengthened requirements for reporting on capital budgets and expenditures, and required reporting for emergency repairs, routine maintenance, and 10-year capital needs. The DEP rule-making process for reporting included in the bill makes requirements enforceable. So far, the Assembly has not introduced a companion bill. This type of transparency is similarly essential for wastewater, and legislation should be introduced to apply Water Quality Accountability standards to wastewater.

**Affordable water and sewer service.**

Now more than ever, access to safe drinking water is essential. Unfortunately, many in New Jersey are experiencing financial insecurity as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and struggle to pay their utility bills. The Committee should advance A2846 (currently referred to the Assembly Telecommunications and Utilities Committee), which would permit certain local units and authorities to reduce water, and sewer, and stormwater fees and other charges for low-income persons. The committee should also simultaneously address customer and utility financial impacts from COVID-19, in order to avoid future shutoffs due to accumulated arrears (after moratoria are lifted) and maintain necessary revenue/income for utility operating and capital budgets.

**Climate change.**

In order to protect our valuable infrastructure from the impacts of climate change, it is essential that New Jersey establish a state sea-level rise standard and an updated design storm to apply to both development and infrastructure.

COVID-19 has reminded us that we can't stay healthy without clean water. New Jersey Future looks forward to the progress this Committee will make toward equitable solutions for reliable, affordable, drinking water. We believe the time for action is now and we stand ready to assist you.