MAKING WAVES

GREAT LAKES AND ST. LAWRENCE CITIES INITIATIVE
L'ALLIANCE DES VILLES DES GRANDS LACS ET DU SAINT-LAURENT

Mayors Commission on Water Equity Advocates for Equitable Implementation of U.S. Infrastructure Law

On September 15, 2022, the Mayors Commission on Water Equity convened a successful field hearing at the One Water Summit in Milwaukee. The field hearing featured testimony from 12 Great Lakes mayors on lead service line replacement and other water-infrastructure projects to promote access to safe, clean, and affordable water for all residents. It also included a productive dialogue regarding the equitable implementation of the $1.2 trillion Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) with senior officials from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and state agencies.

The IIJA provides $11.71 billion for the Clean Water State Revolving Fund and $11.71 billion for the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund programs. It also provides a $15 billion set aside for lead service line replacement.

As we have seen with the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), mayors are the linchpins guiding federal dollars to worthy projects that improve the quality of life for all residents. Mayors have designated millions in ARPA funds for projects that address lead service line replacement, urban flooding, and other water-equity priorities — and they will play a similar leadership role in identifying barriers and proposing solutions to protect the equitable implementation of the infrastructure law.

That is exactly what Great Lakes mayors did at the September 15th field hearing.



Mayor Cavalier Johnson of Milwaukee, the new Co-Chair of the Mayors Commission on Water Equity, stressed that lead service line burdens in Great Lakes cities must factor into the distribution of water-infrastructure funds.

"Milwaukee has approximately 32 percent to 40 percent of Wisconsin's lead service lines. Current estimates… [but] received [only] 10 percent of funding available for lead service line replacement in 2022" from Wisconsin's Safe Drinking Water Loan Program," said Mayor Johnson. He also noted that, without more funding, Milwaukee faced an "unacceptable" 70-year timeline to complete lead service line replacement.



Mayor Lori Lightfoot of Chicago testified about the substantial costs of lead service line replacement and the need for further federal investments in order to replace the remaining 380,000 lead service lines in Chicago.

"I became the first Chicago mayor in history to say enough is enough… and [that] we must be committed to achieving water equity by replacing all of these lead service lines," declared Mayor Lightfoot. "This is, of course, easier said than done, as it costs, approximately, $15,000 to $26,000 for one lead service line replacement. And that means it would take a total of between $8 to $10 billion to replace lines all over the entire city."



Mayor Malik Evans of Rochester explored similar themes in his testimony, highlighting the high stakes of federal investments both in terms of conducting lead service line replacement and avoiding water-rate increases that would harm city residents.

"Realistically, the city cannot generate the revenue required to replace all necessary [lead service] lines without substantially raising costs to homeowners, businesses, not-for-profit organizations, and houses of worship — and that option is not feasible, as water bills would become unaffordable for many," stated Mayor Evans. "We have been aggressive in dedicating available and discretionary funds to ensuring our water supply is lead-free. But even these significant investments are not enough to enable us to meet our goals for complete LSL removal by 2030. We will need additional financial help."



Mayor Billy McKinney of Zion, the Chair of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative, affirmed the importance of purposeful dialogue and collaboration to safeguard the IIJA's transformative potential throughout its five-year implementation cycle.

"It is our responsibility as leaders of cities and federal and state agencies to ensure these historic investments are distributed equitably so that they have their intended impact," explained Mayor McKinney. "That is why we are here today and that is why we must continue to work together."

To promote equitable implementation of the infrastructure law, the Mayors Commission on Water Equity called on EPA and states to enact the following recommendations:

- Incorporate lead service line estimates into a new EPA state needs assessment so Great Lakes states — and, by extension, cities — receive their fair share of IIJA funds.
- Expand technical assistance to Great Lakes cities from EPA to guarantee that all communities may complete lead service line inventories and submit competitive grant applications for IIJA funds.
- Increase access to principal forgiveness to Great Lakes cities by adapting state definitions of disadvantaged communities to include underserved and low-income neighborhoods nested within highly-populated cities.

Additional event details, including a video recording, are available here.

The field hearing featured participation from twelve Great Lakes mayors, including:

- Mayor Cavalier Johnson, Milwaukee, WI
- Mayor Billy McKinney, Zion, IL
- Mayor Lori Lightfoot, Chicago, IL
- Mayor Joe Schember, Erie, PA
- Mayor Malik Evans, Rochester, NY
- Mayor Daniel Biss, Evanston, IL
- Mayor Marcus Muhammad, Benton Harbor, MI
- Mayor Jack Bradley, Lorain, OH
- Mayor Ken Johnson, Muskegon, MI
- Mayor Frank Whitfield, Elyria, OH
- Mayor Ryan Sorenson, Sheboygan, WI
- Mayor Bill Bazzi, Dearborn Heights, MI

Several senior EPA and state officials also participated, including:

- Karen Dettmer, Managing Director for Infrastructure Implementation, Office of Water, EPA
- Debra Shore, Regional Administrator, EPA Region 5
- Kelly Green, Administrator of Water Infrastructure Financing, Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy (EGLE)
- Casey Sweeney, Program and Policy Analyst in Community Financial Assistance Bureau, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
- Jay Patel, SRF Program Manager, Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection

The field hearing was organized in partnership with the U.S. Water Alliance and the Environmental Policy Innovation Center.