

Guest
Editorial

The case for a water trust fund:
Rebuilding America's
infrastructure
and protecting
rural communities

By Rep. Earl Blumenauer

In Dec. 2008, Washington, D.C.-area residents watched in shock as rescue workers airlifted people from vehicles trapped in a massive rush of water caused by a water main rupture in suburban Maryland. More than a dozen people were caught in the deluge, the source of which was a single, corroded pipe that had been improperly installed more than 40 years ago.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, communities around the country suffer from 240,000 water main breaks every year.

The problem plagues both urban and rural areas and large and small communities. Combined with spills from aging and overburdened sewer systems, these infrastructure challenges threaten to roll back the significant improvements we have seen in water quality since the Clean Water Act was passed almost 38 years ago. It is no wonder that the American Society of Civil Engineers has given our nation's water infrastructure a grade of D minus in its recent report card.

As a member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee for more than a decade, I participated in many hearings that drew attention to this issue. In 2003, the Congressional Budget Office released a report suggesting the gap between current spending and projected needs for water was \$11 billion a year. The EPA's most recent estimate is that the gap has increased to \$534 billion over the next 20 years.

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Robert Stewart, RCAP Executive Director (second from right), joins Rep. Earl Blumenauer at the press conference where he introduced the Water Protection and Reinvestment Act on July 15, 2009.

Photo courtesy of Blumenauer's office.

Rep. Earl Blumenauer, a leader with a desire to make communities livable



You would not expect a lawmaker who hails from a district that is largely metropolitan to be concerned about issues that affect rural residents. Oregon's 3rd Congressional district, which encompasses most of the city of Portland, is considered only 7 percent rural.

Yet the district's representative in Washington, D.C., Democrat Earl Blumenauer, a lifelong resident of Portland, has made a name for himself as Congress' chief spokesperson for Livable Communities – places where people are safe, healthy and economically secure – regardless of their size, geographic location, demographic composition, or economic base. He is chairman of the Democratic Caucus' Livable Communities Task Force, which,

according to his website, “seeks to identify the ways in which the federal government can affect community livability and improve Americans' quality of life,” including improving public health.

An avid bicyclist, Blumenauer also cares about the environment and how it is affected by transportation. When he was first elected to his position, Blumenauer founded the Congressional Bike Caucus, and visitors to his website are encouraged to “be bike partisan.”

Blumenauer was elected to the Oregon Legislature in 1972, where he served three terms. Starting in 1986, he served for ten years as the Commissioner of Public Works for the Portland City Council. His leadership on innovative accomplishments in transportation, planning, environmental programs and public participation have helped Portland earn a reputation as one of America's most livable cities.

Often sporting his signature bowtie, Blumenauer was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1996. During his time on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, he was an advocate for federal policies that addressed transportation alternatives, provided housing choices, supported sustainable economies and improved the environment.

That is money we simply do not have in order to meet vital wastewater and drinking water infrastructure repair needs. In a typical year, Congress provides only about \$2.5 billion. With a growing population, increased regulatory requirements, and new challenges posed by global warming, our water and wastewater infrastructure is in crisis. We are seeing more frequent water main breaks and overflows from sewer systems, and we lose the equivalent of 9,000 Olympic-size swimming pools of water every day to leaky pipes.

The question is how do we repair the leaks and close the dangerous funding gap?

In 2008, I left the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee to become a member of the Ways and Means Committee. One of the main reasons I left was to help answer this question about how to finance the rebuilding and renewing of America. Repairing and upgrading water infrastructure is a vital piece of this puzzle.

A federal water trust fund would provide the long-term, sustainable source of revenue we need to ensure economic prosperity and protect the health of people and the environment. This is why I have introduced legislation, the "Water Protection and Reinvestment Act (WPRA)," H.R. 3202, to create such a trust fund, financed broadly by those who contribute to water-quality problems and use water systems.

This legislation will assess small fees on such things as bottled beverages, products disposed of in wastewater, pharmaceuticals, and corporate profits. The trust fund will provide a deficit-neutral, consistent and protected source of revenue to help states and localities replace, repair, and rehabilitate critical drinking water and wastewater treatment facilities.

The Water Protection and Reinvestment Act has broad support from a range of interests, including industry, engineers, contractors, environmentalists, and rural community advocates. I was especially pleased to receive RCAP's support when I introduced the bill.

Without a renewed federal commitment to repair and replace the thousands of miles of pipes that serve our communities, ordinary citizens will be forced to shoulder even more of the burden than they already do – particularly those in rural communities, whose water bills will disproportionately increase.

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American families could see the costs of their water bills skyrocket. A survey by the National Association of Clean Water Agencies projects a steady rise in average residential service charges over the next five years, anticipating the average annual cost for a single-family residence to increase 34 percent from 2008 to 2013. This will be even harder on small communities, which do not have the customer base to support the necessary improvements and upgrades. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which Congress passed in February 2009, provided an important infusion of funding for water infrastructure last year, but it was only a drop in the bucket compared to what will be needed in the coming years.

As Washington searches for more ways to jumpstart our economy, WPRA offers a necessary vehicle for creating hundreds of thousands of local jobs while rebuilding and repairing critical water infrastructure. This \$10 billion annual fund is estimated to create upwards of 270,000 jobs every year in engineering, construction and other industries. If we have trust funds for airports and highways, why can't we create one for the water infrastructure we rely on every single day?

In addition to financing water infrastructure projects through the existing State Revolving Loan Funds, WPRA will create new grant programs to help communities that cannot afford loans. It will also provide funding for organizations like RCAP to provide small water systems with technical, training, management, and financial assistance.

The Water Protection and Reinvestment Act has been referred to four House Committees: Transportation and Infrastructure, Ways and Means, Energy and Commerce, and Science and Technology. It has support from Republican and Democratic members in all regions of the country. I am working with advocates both in and outside Congress to build support for the legislation and to encourage the committees to act quickly to move the bill forward.

Establishing a steady funding source for water infrastructure is a concrete step toward rebuilding the country and setting us on the path to a healthier, more secure future. We can no longer afford to ignore the pipes and systems that go unseen because they are buried in the ground. We should all be working together toward a solution because "out of sight, out of mind" simply doesn't cut it. ■

Earl Blumenauer (D) represents Oregon's 3rd District in the northwestern part of the state, which includes most of Portland.