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Minnesota's new 'Fix the Pipes' alliance announces support for at least \$300 million in bonding to fund largest-ever statewide investment in water infrastructure

Legislative, city, business, labor and environmental leaders promote public works plan that research shows would generate an economic impact of \$1.8 billion, create 7,200 good-paying jobs and help communities address contaminated drinking water

ST. PAUL – A new, nonpartisan alliance of legislative, city, business, labor, engineering and environmental leaders today called for the Minnesota Legislature to invest at least \$300 million in water infrastructure projects that would provide clean drinking water, reduce pollution, improve public health, create approximately 7,200 jobs and generate a financial impact of \$1.8 billion that would help revive COVID-19-ravaged local economies.

Members of the "Fix the Pipes" alliance said with at least a \$300 million bond package that is part of ongoing infrastructure upkeep, many communities can begin replacing aging water and wastewater treatment systems immediately pending legislative approval.

State Sen. David Senjem, R-Rochester, said he understands the financial challenges facing municipalities – especially during this historic economic downturn.

"The Senate Capital Investment Committee has traveled to many communities and seen firsthand the need for water and wastewater infrastructure improvements," said Senjem, who chairs the committee. "Nearly every city has needs that outstrip available local funding.

"I'm confident we will work together with the House and Gov. Walz to fund the right investments for our state."

State Rep. Rick Hansen, DFL-South St. Paul, joined with Senjem in urging their fellow lawmakers to set aside partisan politics and join together to ensure all Minnesotans have access to safe, affordable drinking water.

"Investing in water infrastructure is truly an investment in Minnesota," Hansen said. "No longer should the quality of your water depend on where your live."

Steve Morse, executive director of the **Minnesota Environmental Partnership** and a Fix the Pipes spokesperson, said the state plays a key role in partnering with local governments to provide safe, affordable water while also protecting lakes, rivers and streams.

"Sitting at the headwaters of three major waterways, Minnesota has truly exceptional water resources. Yet 40% of waters tested still don't meet basic health standards," Morse said. "We can do better."

The bonding bill is one of the state's most powerful tools to help restart our economy and ensure that our infrastructure remains sound for the people of Minnesota today and for generations to come, said **Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities Executive Director Bradley Peterson**.

More than 25 organizations are members of the Fix the Pipes alliance (*see full list and more information at www.FixThePipes.org*). Campaign leaders launched this education and awareness effort to urge increased water infrastructure funding as urban and rural cities in every corner of the state struggle with skyrocketing fixes on outdated systems.

State grants and loans through the bonding bill are vital because cities, especially small ones, can't afford multimillion-dollar upgrades to replace antiquated pipes and treatment operations, noted **Jonathan Curry, executive director of the American Council of Engineering Companies of Minnesota**, which represents 7,500 consulting engineers statewide and is part of the Fix the Pipes group.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates Minnesota must invest approximately \$7.5 billion over the next 20 years to upgrade community public water systems to comply with the Safe Drinking Water Act. In addition, more than \$4 billion is needed over the next 20 years to keep up with wastewater infrastructure needs statewide, according to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency.

"Even in the Land of 10,000 Lakes, thousands of Minnesotans face the harsh reality of contaminated drinking water," Curry said. "Lawmakers must address our aging water infrastructure now before a bad situation gets worse – and more expensive."

The alliance's backing of at least \$300 million for water infrastructure aligns with [Gov. Tim Walz's proposed \\$2 billion total public works bonding package](#) introduced in January, which includes a historic \$300 million plan to help cities and other local governments fix and upgrade wastewater and drinking water systems.

"Now is the time to act. Minnesota cities cannot defer these vital projects any longer," said **White Bear Lake Mayor Jo Emerson**.

Though Minnesota lawmakers remain focused on the coronavirus response and addressing the challenge of a projected \$2.4 billion state budget deficit, GOP and Democratic leaders have said publicly that capital investment is still a priority this 2020 session that is scheduled to end May 18.

More than 633,000 Minnesotans have filed for unemployment since March 16, according to Department of Employment and Economic Development data. Fix the Pipes alliance leaders say now is the perfect time to invest in water infrastructure because work on many of the projects could begin as soon as the funds are allocated.

"We think a robust bonding bill is the key to revitalizing Minnesota's economy and putting people to work," said **Craig Johnson of the League of Minnesota Cities**, which serves 832 member cities.

Data compiled by Fix the Pipes shows the water infrastructure projects would create approximately 7,200 jobs statewide. Alliance estimates also show every dollar spent on improving the state's water infrastructure generates \$6 in returns, resulting in a total economic impact in urban, suburban and rural Minnesota communities exceeding \$1.8 billion.

"Minnesotans need common-sense solutions that protect the environment and create and maintain quality, good-paying jobs in communities around our state," said **Bree Halverson, Minnesota program manager for BlueGreen Alliance**, which has joined the Fix the Pipes campaign.

"The Legislature must approve a plan to 'Fix the Pipes' that will get Minnesota moving in the right direction economically and environmentally," Halverson said.

In Mankato, rapidly eroding riverbanks threaten the city's drinking water well, which provides 35% of its water supply. In the last decade, the banks of the Minnesota River have eroded 60 feet and emergency stabilization is underway to avoid losing the well to future flooding. Additional riverbank stabilization is needed to protect the Regional Water Resource Recovery Facility and park.

Walz is recommending \$16.5 million in grants for the city of Mankato for riverbank stabilization and erosion control along the Minnesota River and Indian Creek, and for water-quality mitigation by restoring wetlands. The total cost of these projects is \$24.5 million.

"Businesses rely on critical infrastructure as they work every day to support Minnesota's economy," said **Patrick Baker, vice president of Greater Mankato Growth**, which serves as the local chamber of commerce and economic development organization. "Investing in a bonding bill – and the thousands of good-paying jobs that come with it – will ensure our businesses have what they need to build future economic opportunities."

[Hundreds of Minnesota cities](#) have critical infrastructure projects awaiting funding. Walz's budget proposal calls for investments in every region of the state.

Proposed upgrades in Two Harbors, a city of approximately 3,500 residents 30 minutes northeast of Duluth, would allow the city to consistently meet mercury limits placed on them since 2015, said **Luke Heikkila, the city's wastewater treatment plant superintendent**. Two Harbors is requesting \$11.5 million to cover a portion of the \$20 million price tag to improve its aging systems – including its original wastewater treatment plant built in 1955.

"We're not looking for a handout. But with a population so small, Two Harbors absolutely needs some state help to meet Lake Superior water-quality standards," Heikkila said.

Rural communities are often faced with additional hardships because they lack the resources of larger municipalities, noted **Lori Blair, executive director of the Minnesota Rural Water Association**, which represents water systems serving fewer than 10,000 people.

"These are huge costs for small communities. But it's vital that residents have access to clean and safe drinking water and wastewater facilities – and that means approving a bonding bill sufficient to meet the needs of all Minnesotans," Blair said.

More information about the Fix the Pipes alliance and how the state's \$300 million water infrastructure bonding proposal will improve Minnesota's quality of life is at FixThePipes.org.

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