



WHAT HAPPENED TO SWAP??!!

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Bring you good tidings of great joy! OUR WATER INFRASTRUCTURE CRISIS IS OVER! I mean it has to be over, right? No one seems to be pounding their fists anymore in outrage over crumbling water infrastructure. News coverage of a water main break has been reduced to telling commuters to use alternate routes in order to avoid traffic delays. Sanitary sewer overflows (SSO's) don't get much attention at all. All sorts of "free" money is available for capital projects to upgrade our water infrastructure. Because all our woes are over, SWAP, the proposed Safe Water Infrastructure Action Program, a proposal that would provide municipalities with water, sewer and storm water infrastructure annual supplemental operation and maintenance (O&M) funds, was barely a blip on the legislative radar. THE CRISIS REALLY IS OVER!!!!

You know as well as I that the crisis is far from over. Other shiny objects have attracted our attention. PFOA/PFOS and lead in schools have dominated the headlines. I'm not marginalizing their importance. These are serious issues. Removing and/or treating these contaminants will require even more capital investment in our water infrastructure. Again what seems to be missing is a way to help maintain these investments over the long term. O&M costs are rising at rates that many, if not most of our small and rural facilities can afford. Many of our municipalities are up to their eyeballs in capital debt, and because of a shrinking of their user base, find it difficult to maintain those facilities. Sustainability seems to have morphed into "asset management plans" that some will have us believe will solve all our problems. I was talking with a colleague of mine not long ago who said we are stuck in a ridiculous cycle. We will throw out money today to upgrade these crumbling facilities and in another 30 years do it all over again because we don't have the money or political will to fund the O&M properly.

O&M are the tools used to prolong the life of these facilities as well as protect our environment. As I have said countless times before, what good is putting all this money into upgrading these facilities if there is not a way to economically sustain the O&M? Insufficient O&M funding has been a major contributor to our infrastructure issues. Years of keeping rates low as well as deferring maintenance, repair and replacement of critical infrastructure because "we don't have the money" are just some of the reasons that have led to our current crisis.

SWAP was (is) designed to provide municipalities with water,

sewer and storm water infrastructure, a supplemental funding stream to support operation and maintenance activities much like the successful Consolidated Local Street and Highway Improvement Program (CHIPS) helps support our roads. Introduced shortly after the unusually cold winter several years ago that saw an unprecedented number of water main breaks and water line (and main) freeze-ups, the proposed SWAP bill sought to bring attention to all of New York's water infrastructure needs and provide a funding mechanism to help support O&M activities. Not every facility needs a capital improvement project. Almost all need a little extra O&M funding. SWAP would afford them the opportunity to perform maintenance and/or replacement activities above and beyond what was budgeted for. These would be smaller projects such as manhole rehabilitation or water line replacement and would not require engineering and the associated costs. The infrastructure to these communities would be constantly improving through the increased operation and maintenance funding. The long term sustainability of the systems would improve and rates could stabilize and remain affordable.

New York is a leader in this nation when it comes to its commitment to infrastructure improvement. We have, and will be, providing billions of dollars over the next few years to improve our water infrastructure. From passing some of the strictest PFOA/PFOS limits to adopting BEACH act requirements for some waters in the state, New York is proving its leadership and commitment to protecting people and the environment. In a year that saw a record number of bills passed, it's dismaying to me that SWAP didn't even warrant discussion. 💧💧

