Economic Stimulus Funds to Provide New Opportunities for Local Infrastructure Solutions

American utilities are in need of some federal help to make it through this economic low point.

By Jim Schmitt

As our nation fights the COVID-19 pandemic, we are thankful for the heroes in our hospitals and medical clinics who are caring for our sick, and for those looking for better, more effective treatments in labs across the nation. We are also blessed to have our police, firefighters, and other first responders who face an increased amount of danger as they encounter infected citizens and work to protect public safety.

There's another group of people who are also reporting to work who we need to thank — utility workers. Governments at all levels have declared utility workers as "essential" employees. This shows us how important utility infrastructure is in our daily lives, and what it means to keeping our communities strong and our economy moving forward.

**Economic Hit on Utilities**

There are challenges, however, for utilities. On March 13, the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin ordered water utilities not to disconnect customers for nonpayment. This order provided a sense of relief for five million Wisconsinites to know their water will keep running. Even so, our local water utilities will take an economic hit. The National Association of Clean Water Agencies estimated that wastewater utilities alone will lose a minimum of $12.5 billion due to falling revenue as commercial and industrial customers reduce usage and non-paying customers remain in service. That's why associations representing water utilities have asked Congress to include the industry in the next economic relief bill.

Congress has worked through four legislative packages with the largest one coming at more than $2 trillion with financial relief and support for hospitals and community health centers, expanded unemployment benefits, assistance for public transit agencies, and help for small businesses. The fourth economic relief bill was a $484

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Billion package to help fund the Paycheck Protection Program, and to provide more funding for hospitals and testing.

As our elected leaders look to additional packages, we should keep in mind how we can make long-term infrastructure investments work best for local communities. We hear so much talk about repairing roads and bridges, but we cannot forget about the millions of miles of water piping underneath them.

**Ingenuity in Infrastructure Solutions**

Infrastructure projects are expensive, and they require a mix of public and private investments. They also require ingenuity. Local governments would have fresh opportunity to apply integrated solutions based on specific community needs. For example, working on updating and fixing our water systems while the roads and highways above them are being dug up and repaved would be a smart step that local governments can take to save dollars and lessen disruptions.

If infrastructure is included in the next stimulus, we’d want to cut the “red tape” that typically accompanies federal legislation. Community-specific solutions are necessary to apply funding in economical and advantageous ways — for water infrastructure as well as other utility needs. To point: Wisconsin is a diverse state. Green Bay has different needs from places such as La Crosse, Eau Claire, Sheboygan or even Madison. Our local engineers, utility professionals and other community experts know what is needed for each system. To make time- and cost-effective decisions, they must be free from “one size fits all” mandates on how to design and upgrade their local systems. Freeing them from bureaucratic burdens will help spur economic recovery in the quickest and most effective way.

Together we can stay safe, get through this pandemic and take advantage of new opportunities to upgrade infrastructure through locally-designed solutions. Taking federal infrastructure dollars — and letting those who are closest to the needs of their communities make decisions on where to use the funds — will have an immediate impact that will help get the economy going again.

Jim Schmitt was the longest serving mayor of Green Bay. He also served as a supervisor for Brown County.