OPINION

Crucial water questions remain on tap for city, region

By REP. JOSH ZEPNICK

Providing clean, safe drinking water is a critical function of local, state and federal government agencies. Here in Milwaukee, we have an excellent Water Works Department with major facilities in my own legislative district on Milwaukee's South Side.

But as Flint, Mich., shows, there are long-term and expensive needs throughout the Great Lakes region, including right here in Milwaukee, to keep our water systems up to current federal requirements and ensure that everyone has access to affordable and clean water.

Our water infrastructure, put simply, is very old and run-down, having been installed during a simpler and smaller America. Today's costs of upgrading our sewer and water systems is enormous. According to a 2013 Environmental Protection Agency report, an estimated $384 billion is needed through 2030 to update water infrastructure on a national level to ensure safe drinking water to roughly 300 million residents.

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources has estimated that lead pipe replacement to the homeowners' portion of a lead pipe service line would cost $3,000 per home — that's several hundred million dollars just in Milwaukee. When these systems were originally built, cities were just starting to grow and were nowhere near 2016 population levels. I recently sent a letter to Gov. Scott Walker stressing the importance of replacing our lead service lines and also the urgency of bringing the state in line with federal lead level standards. Wisconsin categorizes lead poisoning at levels that are double the federal threshold. Our citizens shouldn't be subjected to the potentially deadly consequences of twice as much lead in our water.

Like many citizens, I do not support for-profit or commercial takeovers of our water system. The Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District contracts with Veolia Corp., but it is tightly regulated and accountable to local citizens and elected officials. The MMSD is running well and has yielded not only cost savings to taxpayers and improved water quality, but positive economic impact to our local economy. One economic report shows output to the citizens and taxpayers of $218.3 million, with 1,368 jobs supported, generating $57.2 million in annual wages and salaries.

Delivery of our clean water must be regulated by local, state, and federal officials. In Flint, a number of lousy planning decisions, incompetent government managers and inadequate communication between local, state, and federal officials resulted in a major public health crisis. The crisis has garnered the attention of policymakers nationally including Wisconsin's U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin, who recently co-sponsored legislation to replace public water systems utilizing lead pipes with iron and steel made in America and creating American jobs. This legislation is a step in the right direction nationally and something we should be advocating for locally.

Zepnick

The Milwaukee Water Commons meeting was scheduled to unveil its "Water City Agenda" on Thursday, which I planned to attend. It's a six-part strategy with roles for the public and private sector:

- Milwaukee is a national leader in blue-green jobs.
- Safe, clean and affordable tap water is available to every Milwaukeean.
- We significantly advance green infrastructure practices across the city.
- Our three rivers and Lake Michigan are swimmable and fishable.
- Every Milwaukeean has meaningful water experiences.
- Milwaukee celebrates our waters in arts and culture.

Milwaukee's South Side is fortunate to have a number of these goals already in progress, including the Kinnickinnic River cleanup, the revitalization of the Menomonee River and Valley renewal as well as major stormwater runoff reduction projects put in place by the city of Milwaukee and Milwaukee County government. Groups like the Urban Ecology Center and 16th Street Community Health Center continue to play a critical role in working with the EPA, the DNR, the MMSD, and the city of Milwaukee to advance innovative solutions to keeping our water safe for the next generation. In the last 10 years, the state has invested more than $25 million in Milwaukee's South Side and it's likely that more state and federal funding will be a large part of the national debate in the next few years.

(Rep. Josh Zepnick of Milwaukee, represents the 9th Assembly District.)