



# WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE

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## **Towards Flint**

*By Representatives Chris Taylor & LaTonya Johnson*

Our nation is watching in horror as the Flint water disaster unfolds, a completely avoidable, unnecessary public health crises that threatens an entire town and the health and welfare of its people. A Republican controlled executive and legislative branch authorized unaccountable emergency managers to swoop in, take over municipalities, and engaging in “cost cutting” measures like switching Flint’s drinking water source from Lake Huron to the Flint river, failing to treat the water for corrosive elements at an approximate cost of \$100 a day. This failure resulted in the poisoning of a whole town.

Republican power grabs in Wisconsin have also centered on eroding local control of our most precious natural resource – water. Specifically, on ways to make it easier for private interests to take it, use it and pollute it, while destroying a community’s ability to do anything about it. The Republicans have bills that allow developers to build on lakebeds, remove local governments’ ability to limit polluting industries, and open the door for private companies to purchase public utilities.

Just this week, Assembly Republicans asked the Attorney General for an opinion on high-capacity water wells. Republicans are now saying the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) can’t even regulate Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), also called factory farms, which harm water quality and quantity. The public has no input on this request and an opinion by the Attorney General on this issue means no legislation would be necessary to further limit the DNR’s power.

Already, the quality of our water is suffering. One-third of Kewaunee County wells are unsafe for drinking, while other wells around the state are contaminated with nitrate, bacteria, arsenic, atrazine, radium, and molybdenum. Lead pipes like the ones in Flint threaten 70,000 residences in Milwaukee, 10,000 in Racine, 8,000 in West Allis, 6,500 in Manitowoc, 7,000 in Kenosha, almost 2,000 in Green Bay and 3,000 in Shorewood. In fact, the children in the Cities of Milwaukee and Watertown, Racine and Menasha have a greater incidence of lead poisoning than the Flint children, as do our the counties of Buffalo, Green Lake, Pepin, Richland and Rock.

The consequences of lead poisoning for young children can be deadly and lead to a lifetime of cognitive and other ailments. That’s why we are introducing a bill to make sure that when children have lead contamination, their drinking water and paint in their households get tested in state mitigation efforts.

According to a recent poll from the League of Conservation Voters, the public overwhelming supports government action to keep water safe and clean. 84% of people surveyed said that water pollution is an important priority.

But the desires of actual people seems more and more irrelevant to state policy making. It is telling that several of the bills pending in the Wisconsin legislature that further erode water protections by allowing dredging, pollution, and private development are supported by special interest groups calling the shots – the Koch brother funded Americans for Prosperity and Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce. These

groups have spent millions to maintain a Republican chokehold on all branches of our government. This inundation of unlimited, secret dark money in our elections was recently made worse by the gutting of our state campaign finance laws by Republican policymakers, which the people of this state did not ask for. Combined with making it harder to vote and some of the worst gerrymandering seen nationally in 40 years, the people of Wisconsin are more and more irrelevant in state policymaking. And so often, the voices being ignored are from people of color, the poor, and the party not in charge.

And that is the story of Flint. Once democratic government is gone, like clean water, it can be hard to reverse the devastation that follows. The ramifications for people are catastrophic.