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Former N.J. governors: Group working together to tackle our greatest challenges

James J. Florio and Christine Todd Whitman *Guest Columnists*

It has been a tough year for New Jersey's water infrastructure. A series of water main breaks in Hoboken this summer reminds us yet again that the pipes that carry water to many of our homes and businesses are old, leaky and failing. Drinking water contaminated with lead continues to be an issue not just in Newark but in cities and towns across the state, and dangerous contaminants known as PFASs are emerging as a new threat. Polluted runoff into our storm drainage system resulted in beaches being closed at the height of tourist season, and frequent flooding from increasingly severe rainstorms has highlighted even further the need for more effective ways to manage stormwater.

As former governors, we know that in order to foster healthy, thriving, equitable communities, we need to ensure that they can depend upon safe drinking water, clean waterways and protection from flooding. A reluctance to upgrade our water infrastructure is nothing more or less than a reluctance to invest in our future: A 21st-century New Jersey cannot continue to rely on crumbling infrastructure.

Whenever a problem of this magnitude is raised, the first two questions that most New Jerseyans will ask are who is going to fix it and how are we going to pay for it.

The fact of the matter is that no one organization, not even the state government, can tackle our water infrastructure problems alone.

Effecting real change will take a suite of solutions and a collaborative effort from public and private utilities; state, county and local government; businesses and manufacturers; community leaders and stakeholders; and concerned citizens. Every New Jerseyan has a stake in this issue, whether you are a parent pouring your child a glass of water, a firefighter opening a hydrant to save your neighbor's home, or a manufacturer turning the water valve to cool your machinery.

We are proud to co-chair a unique statewide collaborative called Jersey Water Works, which was formed for this exact purpose, and which has taken a strong leadership role in addressing this issue.

By combining our efforts, we know that these problems can be solved.

Over the past three years, Jersey Water Works has brought together leaders from across the Garden State to raise awareness about water infrastructure issues and to find solutions. Its proposals are finding their way into how utilities run, into the rules proposed by government agencies, into water infrastructure projects being implemented across the state, and even into legislation.

Jersey Water Works creates opportunities for partnership, such as the One Water Awards, which recognize water stewardship leaders in the public, private and nonprofit sectors. Supported by Jersey Water Works and a network of water industry associations, the One Water Awards drive

home the importance of water infrastructure at all levels.

This year's winners include AeroFarms, whose Newark facility has found innovative ways to grow crops locally using very little water; Camden SMART, a cross-sector collaborative bringing together stakeholders to build parks, reduce flooding and keep sewage off the city's streets; and the town of Hammonton, whose leadership in innovative strategies for conserving and stretching water resources can serve as a model for other towns in the state.

Additionally, New Jersey's state government, which is an active participant in Jersey Water Works, is finding innovative ways to fund solutions to these challenges. This includes providing money for remediating lead in drinking water and proposing the creation of stormwater utilities, which would allow individual towns to finance projects to fix flooding and pollution caused by runoff.

State agencies are also empowering utilities to assess and publicize the condition of underground pipes so they can fix them proactively, which saves ratepayers money.

Still, there is more work to be done. Determining how we maintain our water infrastructure so that the investments benefit everyone is not just a job for a handful of engineers and financiers.

It requires civic engagement — informed stakeholders pushing for change — from all sectors and all communities. Jersey Water Works' annual conference, which takes place this year on Dec. 7, is a great opportunity for everyone to learn more about the most beneficial ways to upgrade our water systems, and the best ways to advocate so that it is a priority.

We believe that water — both quality and quantity — is the No. 1 environmental issue of the 21st century. But in the same state that gave the world Thomas Edison, the John A. Roebling's Sons Company and Bell Labs, we can be leaders in building a 21st-century water system that can serve as a model for the rest of the country, and indeed the world.

James J. Florio was governor of New Jersey from 1990 to 1994. Christine Todd Whitman was governor of New Jersey from 1994 to 2001. More information about Jersey Water Works is available at jerseywaterworks.org.

Group goals

Jersey Water Works is a collaborative effort of many diverse organizations and individuals who embrace the common purpose of transforming New Jersey's inadequate water infrastructure by investing in sustainable, cost-effective solutions that provide communities with clean water and waterways; healthier, safer neighborhoods; local jobs; flood and climate resilience; and economic growth.

Source: Jersey Water Works

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