

Jersey Water Works Annual Conference

Remarks by Tanuja M. Dehne

Good afternoon, and thank you so much for inviting me to speak with you all today. I hope that you all enjoyed lunch and the morning sessions, and that you have a new burst of energy as we enter the next sessions of the day. There are still many interesting sessions to come and a great agenda ahead.

While this is the 8th annual Jersey Water Works conference, I want to acknowledge that this is the *first* conference where we are all together, in-person, post-pandemic. It's wonderful to be here with you all – to see your faces and reconnect – and to join in celebration of the work and impact this community has achieved.

In joining you all today, I want to take a moment to go back to the beginning.

The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation's funding relationship with NJ Future began way back in 1987 with funding to generate public support for a statewide land-use policy. Over time, our support evolved to supporting advocacy for the development of an action plan for investment in New Jersey's urban water systems.

That work, and that focus, started in earnest with former Dodge President/CEO Chris Daggett and Program Director Margaret Waldock, as well as the wonderful NJ Future Team. They worked alongside Governor Florio and Governor Whitman at the time, listening to the concerns of community members and stakeholders.

With their leadership and guidance, the work continued to grow, and they continued to highlight the major issues across the state that too few were paying attention to or taking action against. I want to take a moment to say thank you to the many backbone staff in the room today who have been integral members of the Jersey Water Works journey. Thank you, truly, thank you.

While we are incredibly proud of our support of Jersey Water Works over the years, we are just one of many who have championed and supported this work. I also want to take a moment and thank the many other funders and collaborators who joined us and moved the work forward. Thank you especially to NJDEP, Springpoint Partners,



US Water Alliance, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Kresge Foundation, and Pew Charitable Trusts.

And, finally, I want to thank the members of the steering committee and other committees. I know that you have given so much of your time and expertise to this work, and we are all so grateful. I especially want to thank Dodge Foundation's own... Naeema Campbell, who serves on the steering committee and has been such a thoughtful partner in this work.

Since the beginning, the important work of Jersey Water Works put a spotlight on failing urban water infrastructure as a barrier to urban growth, and a threat to water quality, ecological health, and use of urban waters. As a statewide funder, our organization understood the magnitude of the problem and its deep impacts particularly on black, people of color, Indigenous and low-income communities throughout the state of NJ. Our collective goal was and has been to support new water infrastructure systems that can transform New Jersey's urban waterways.

Over the past decade, Jersey Water Works has had tremendous impact towards that goal.

- The Jersey Water Works collaborative has increased understanding and awareness of water infrastructure challenges and solutions across the state.
- You all have also generated research and analysis that led to concrete policy action and change. In particular, the Jersey Water Works Lead in Drinking Water Task Force produced recommendations on lead in drinking water that created a pathway to the creation of a comprehensive lead initiative supported by Governor Murphy, and the introduction of legislation based on those recommendations. By 2021, Governor Murphy signed 6 important bills that address lead in drinking water.
- During the pandemic, Jersey Water Works knew that many community members would be vulnerable to losing water at a time already filled with pain and uncertainty. Jersey Water Works urged the governor to adopt a moratorium on water shut-offs, leading to the administration implementing a voluntary statewide utility moratorium.

These are just a few of the incredible achievements of this collaborative, and we know there are many more to come. This is why we're particularly proud to have supported Jersey Water Works last year with a 3-year, \$1M grant – one of our organization's first multi-year grants. We know multi-year funding support is essential to our partners. As our organization continues its transformation to center racial equity and justice in our work, we are committed to employing collaborative funding strategies that meet the needs of our community with the maximum flexibility to



sustain their important work, engage new funding partners and sources, and grow their impact over time.

With this most recent grant, our organization has supported Jersey Water Works through the decade with a total of almost \$3.5M. When I look around this room – at the powerful advocates, policymakers, and collaborators in this work – we are just incredibly proud at what we have all achieved together.

As I wrap up, I want to note the important themes of today's conference around leadership and community engagement.

Jersey Water Works' model of collaborative and collective action is a model of leadership that should be applauded and lifted up. By bringing together diverse perspectives and stakeholders from a variety of backgrounds, Jersey Water Works has been able to advocate for policy change that truly meets the needs of the community. As we all continue our journey to build a just and equitable New Jersey, leadership and community engagement must be at the forefront of our conversations, strategies, and priorities.

Additionally, we acknowledge the significance of investing in people... in the people that will power the water sector workforce. As the overall sector confronts labor shortage issues in the future, continuing to focus on people will enable us to create safe, reliable, well-managed water systems throughout the state. And, bringing the same lens and model of collaboration, diversity, and a human-centered approach will mean focusing on opportunities to strengthen a workforce that is fully representative of the residents the water systems serve.

What we know at the Dodge Foundation – and what Jersey Water Works knows – is that we are better together and better when we collaborate towards a shared vision and goals. We are stronger together. And only by working together can we make a real and lasting difference.

Thank you, and I look forward to sharing more and learning more with you all today.