

Gov. Cuomo's proposed budget fails to invest enough in clean water (Commentary)

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(These projects) give our kids clean places to play ... They put people to work. They are the backbone of progress and economic growth.

The following commentary was submitted by Willie Janeway of the Adirondack Council, Peter Iwanowicz of Environmental Advocates of New York, Marcia Bystryn of the New York League of Conservation Voters, Patricia Cerro-Reehil of the New York Water Environment Association and Paul Gallay of Riverkeeper.

In recent statements, Gov. Andrew Cuomo touted the high value of a "clean water supply that is vital to the livelihood of all New Yorkers" and **said** "New York does more than any other state to finance local wastewater infrastructure projects that protect the environment and support jobs." It is true that the New York state Environmental Facilities Corp. has played a pivotal role in providing low-cost financing for wastewater projects. Yet with the financial struggles of many municipalities -- even with low-cost loan programs in place, an infrastructure bank to support clean water for all is needed in this year's state budget.

We applauded when the governor said he would propose using bank settlement funds to help seed an infrastructure bank with the ability to make "**gap-closing grants.**" During the campaign, the governor said he would "redouble efforts to address the substantial wastewater infrastructure needs..." Further, his "**2015 Opportunity**

Agenda" notes "waste water and drinking water investments protect water quality, improve public health, facilitate keystone economic development, and foster recreational tourism."

However, New York state has not yet established a new dedicated wastewater infrastructure bank. The only funding stream proposed by Gov. Cuomo, in his executive budget is an Upstate regional competition, through which dollars would be awarded to three out of seven eligible regions. Long Island, New York City and Buffalo are not eligible and there's no assurance that clean water infrastructure would be funded as part of any region's plan.

Despite Syracuse Mayor Stephanie Miner's **proposal** last fall to repair and replace Syracuse's water/wastewater infrastructure using the state's windfall bank settlement, the governor has suggested the money would go to private investments.

"This is about bringing jobs to that region. Period," Cuomo said. "Not attempts, not infrastructure that might one day help. This is about creating jobs, which create opportunity, which create wealth -- and that only the private sector does."

The deterioration of roads and bridges is clear to see. But the deterioration is more severe below ground, as those who have dealt with sewage backing up in basements and spilling into creeks know all too well. The state Department of Environmental Conservation has documented the need for investment in wastewater statewide is at least \$36 billion.

These are projects that maintain the character and charm of our communities and protect property values. They give our kids clean places to play and tourists a powerful reason to visit. They put people to work. They are the backbone of progress and economic growth.

Ask local leaders about their challenges, and investing in wastewater infrastructure is at or near the top of the list. These are real local costs that most communities cannot bear -- especially with a 2 percent tax cap that inhibits long-term investment. Instead, the solutions we get are like placing a tarp over a hole in the roof. It will hold, sure - but for how long, and at what long-term cost when it fails during the big storm?

Our communities are investments, just like our homes. We wouldn't let a roof rot, a foundation crumble or a cracked window go unreplaced. It's not what we want for our communities, either.

It has been 50 years since New York voters approved a \$1 billion Pure Waters Bond Act, at a time when the statewide need for sewer infrastructure was estimated at \$1.7 billion. The investment paid dividends in clean water and proud communities. We're overdue for another bold investment or at least a modest but real investment. Our organizations and our partners at Riverkeeper, Adirondack Council and New York League of Conservation Voters urge the Governor, Assembly and Senate to do what's needed, in this year's budget, to help municipalities upgrade their water and sewer infrastructure.

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