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The Corrosion of America

By **BOB HERBERT**

If you had a leak in your roof or in the kitchen or basement, you'd probably think it a good idea to have it taken care of before matters got worse, and more expensive.

If only we had the same attitude when it comes to the vast and intricately linked water systems in the United States. Most of us take clean and readily available water for granted. But the truth is that the nation's water systems are in sorry shape — deteriorating even as the population grows and demand increases.

Aging and corroded pipes are bursting somewhere every couple of minutes. Dilapidated sewer systems are contaminating waterways and drinking water. Many local systems are so old and inadequate — in some cases, so utterly rotten — that they are overwhelmed by heavy rain.

As Charles Duhigg [reported in The Times last March](#): “For decades, these systems — some built around the time of the Civil War — have been ignored by politicians and residents accustomed to paying almost nothing for water delivery and sewage removal. And so each year, hundreds of thousands of ruptures damage streets and homes and cause dangerous pollutants to seep into drinking water supplies.”

There is, of course, no reason for this to be the case. If this were a first-class society we would rebuild our water systems to the point where they would be the envy of the world, and that would bolster the economy in the bargain. But that would take maturity and vision and effort and sacrifice, all of which are in dismayingly short supply right now.

We can't even build a railroad tunnel beneath the Hudson River from New Jersey to New York.

Improving water systems — and infrastructure generally, if properly done — would go a long way toward improving the nation's dismal economic outlook. According to the U.S. Conference of Mayors, every dollar invested in water and sewer improvements has the potential to increase the long-term gross domestic product by more than six dollars. Hundreds of thousands of jobs would be created if the nation were serious about repairing and upgrading water mains, crumbling pipes, water treatment plants, dams, levees and so on.

Millions of jobs would be created if we could bring ourselves to stop fighting mindless wars and use some of

those squandered billions to bring the nation's infrastructure in the broadest sense up to 21st-century standards.

The need is tremendous. The nation's network of water systems was right at the bottom of the latest infrastructure grades handed out by the American Society of Civil Engineers, receiving a D-minus. Jeffrey Griffiths, the chairman of the Drinking Water Panel of the Science Advisory Board of the Environmental Protection Agency, told *The Times*: "We're relying on water systems built by our great-grandparents, and no one wants to pay for the decades we've spent ignoring them. There's a lot of evidence that people are getting sick. But because everything is out of sight, no one really understands how bad things have become."

What has always struck me about this issue is that there is a desperate need to improve the nation's infrastructure and a desperate need for the jobs and enhanced economic activity that would come from sustained, long-term infrastructure investment. But somehow the leadership and the will to move forward on the scale that is needed are missing.

A [survey](#) to be released this week by the ITT Corporation, which makes and sells water infrastructure equipment, shows that nearly 70 percent of respondents agreed with the statement "I generally take my access to clean water for granted." But a similar percentage said they would be willing to pay a modest additional amount every month to upgrade their water system and ensure their long-term access to clean water.

If public officials would provide honest leadership on this and other infrastructure issues, making a sound case for the investments that are needed and the benefits that would accrue from rebuilding America's infrastructure, the public would be likely to sign on.

We can start getting our act together now, or we can pay dearly later. The Obama administration has provided federal support for some water and other infrastructure improvements but nothing close to the kind of effort needed to bring America's infrastructure into even reasonable shape.

The horror stories abound: the drowning of New Orleans when the levees failed in 2005, the 2007 explosion of an ancient steam pipe in Manhattan that killed one person and injured more than 30, the gas pipeline explosion and fire last month in San Bruno, Calif., that killed seven and injured more than 50. There are endless other examples, tragic, costly and unnecessary.

The sorry state of America's infrastructure is a hard-core reflection of what is really going on in this increasingly hapless society, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: October 27, 2010

An earlier version of this column used an out of date identification for Jeffrey Griffiths. Mr. Griffiths is now the chairman of the Drinking Water Panel of the Science Advisory Board of the Environmental Protection Agency.