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October 29, 2010

Rebuilding Our Aging Water Systems

To the Editor:

Re “[The Corrosion of America](#)” (column, Oct. 26), about the deterioration of the country’s water systems:

Bob Herbert’s analogy of fixing a leak before it gets worse and more expensive is right on target. In New York City, we are doing just that — and on a large scale.

For instance, the city has two water tunnels that are both more than 70 years old. Construction on a third tunnel began in 1970, but city funding ebbed and flowed with the economic and political times. But Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg has invested more money in the tunnel than the previous five mayors combined — and it is now nearing completion.

Despite a strained budget, New York continues making these investments essentially on its own. For example, between 2002 and 2009, only \$41 million of the \$6.3 billion that the city invested in protecting harbor water quality came from federal grants — a tiny 0.65 percent.

That trend has to be reversed if we are serious about fixing the problem. Protecting our water supplies and cleaning our environment are national priorities, so it is critical that the federal government restore its commitment as a funding partner.

Cas Holloway
Commissioner
New York City Department
of Environmental Protection
New York, Oct. 27, 2010

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To the Editor:

Bob Herbert's column about aging water infrastructure correctly points out that many of our nation's water pipes need repair or replacement and that we too often take for granted our buried water infrastructure.

While the problem is well documented, it's time to move toward viable solutions. The American Water Works Association conducted a [study](#) of water infrastructure finance solutions and strongly recommends the creation of a federal water infrastructure bank.

The bank would provide low-cost loans to communities with critical water infrastructure needs. These loans would dramatically reduce the cost of repairs for cities and consumers, encourage immediate action on water projects and even spur job creation.

And it would do all this without adding to the federal deficit. A federal water infrastructure bank strikes just the right balance between federal assistance and local responsibility.

David LaFrance
Executive Director
American Water Works Association
Denver, Oct. 27, 2010

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To the Editor:

Bob Herbert hits the nail on the head when he argues that our society's failure to invest in its water infrastructure will soon result in an enormous health, safety and energy bill coming due.

For example, it has been estimated that the City of Chicago loses more than half of its water between the treatment plant and the faucet, with all the costs associated with such waste. The problem is now so great that we cannot afford to fix it with the current century-old methods of repairing and replacing our water systems.

We need the same technology breakthroughs that have enabled other sectors to make quantum

leaps in efficiency, productivity and reliability for lower costs. For too long the water sector has lacked innovation in re-piping, coatings, energy efficiency and water filtration, among other challenges.

We are working to change that, because without such innovation, our nation's water problem is even worse than Mr. Herbert thinks.

F. Mark Modzelewski

Daniel Ritter

Shelton, Conn., Oct. 27, 2010

The writers are, respectively, the executive director of and the policy counsel to Water Innovations Alliance, a trade association.

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To the Editor:

Not only do we need to invest more in our nation's outdated infrastructure, but we also need to invest smarter. Simply rebuilding the dams, levees and pipes of the 19th century won't be enough to keep up with the demands that a growing population and climate change are placing on our water systems.

Instead, we need to invest in 21st-century green infrastructure solutions, like wetland restoration and green roofs, that replicate natural functions and are cheaper, more flexible and more resilient than traditional approaches.

Communities nationwide are realizing that these innovative green infrastructure solutions come with multiple benefits. On Staten Island, the New York City Department of Environmental Protection integrated restored wetlands into its stormwater management program. The project has improved water quality, reduced flood damage, decreased threats to public health and revitalized wildlife habitat.

New York City's new [Green Infrastructure Plan](#) is designed to save \$2.4 billion over 20 years as part of a sustainable strategy for clean water.

The [Green Infrastructure for Clean Water Act](#), introduced in the House and the Senate, would help ensure that communities nationwide can implement projects like this. Congress should act swiftly to pass the bill.

Rebecca Wodder
President, American Rivers
Washington, Oct. 28, 2010