

THE BOND BUYER

Mayors welcome law to help deal with aging water infrastructure

By

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WASHINGTON — The passage of the Water Infrastructure Improvement Act earlier this month came in the nick of time for U.S. mayors as they battle to shore up aging water infrastructure.

According to panelists at the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the bipartisan bill, signed into law by President Trump on Jan. 14, gives municipalities more flexibility to meet federal standards under the Environmental Protection Agency's Clean Water Act. It will help stabilize or reduce costs for low-and fixed-income residents in cities throughout the U.S., they said. Water and wastewater systems are paid for by ratepayers.

For Mayor Michael Summers of Lakewood, Ohio, passage of the bill was a game changer. In his 50,000-person town off Lake Erie, about 30% of the population is at or near poverty, he said.

"If you could imagine, we're encircled in battle losing, and the cavalry shows up on the hill — that's the water bill for us," said Mayor Michael Summers of Lakewood, Ohio.

The town was confronting the challenge of updating its 100-year-old sewer system to meet the requirements of the CWA through enforcement by Ohio EPA and U.S. EPA. The act establishes the regulation of discharges of pollutants into bodies of water and set quality standards for surface waters.

The CWA outlawed the discharge of any pollutant into navigable waters without a specific permit, and Lakewood's current permit expires this year, the mayor wrote in a letter. The city still needed to meet the EPA's requirements. With the new law, the town's permit can include consecutive permits, allowing more time to come up with a solution, Summers said.

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Karen Weaver, mayor of Flint, Michigan, wants to continue to provide access for water, without raising water rates.

In 2014, [Flint faced a major water crisis](#) when the state switched the city's water supply to save money. The state then failed to treat the corrosive water and the water was contaminated with lead. About 90 people got sick from the contaminated water and 12 died from exposure to bacteria, [according to Frontline](#).

"Everybody has talked about cost, with everything we've been through, there's no way in the world we would raise water rates; people just started paying for their water again," Weaver said.

Other mayors at the meeting spoke on the challenges of aging infrastructure and meeting EPA standards.

"I think we share a lot of issues in common when we're talking about aging infrastructure. In 2014, we had an earthquake and I saw firsthand the aging infrastructure and how susceptible it was," said Jill Techel, mayor of Napa, California.

Beverly Hills, California was able to keep the water on for residents after a water leaked from a broken 70-year-old water main, Mayor Julian Gold. If it had exploded, residents would have been without water. "We're living on a burning platform," he said, referencing the aging infrastructure.