

**New York Water Environment Association Testimony
at the Joint Legislative Public Hearing – Environmental Conservation
on the 2016-2017 Executive Budget Proposal**

Presented by: Patricia Cerro-Reehil

Thursday, January 28, 2016



Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today regarding the significant role that public wastewater infrastructure plays in relation to protection of public health and the environment and its connection to economic development.

My name is Patricia Cerro-Reehil, I am the Executive Director of the NY Water Environment Association, an organization that was founded in 1929 by water professionals to serve the best interest of the public by promoting sustainable clean water management through science, education and training. Our members include more than 2,500 professionals, who work 24/7 protecting public health and the environment. From small village treatment plants in the Adirondacks, to utility executives in New York City, our members take pride and are dedicated to ensuring safe water for all New Yorkers. I have the pleasure of being here today with Joe Brillling, who is a wastewater treatment plant operator and the Executive Director of the Washington County Sewer District.

We all consume water and create waste. In fact, the average American uses 176 gallons of water daily. Every drop of water that enters this building and our homes and businesses is treated and discharged back into the water cycle to be **re**used and **re**cycled. Water is a finite resource that must be managed well.

We are encouraged by the Governor's budget proposal to increase monies in the Water Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2015. The total investment of \$300 million in grants over 3 years will leverage more than 1.5 billion in local investments in water infrastructure across the state. Although these increases will spur investment in clean water systems the infrastructure needs are much greater.

- On January 13, 2016, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency released its Clean Watersheds Survey, the first national update in four years on the need for wastewater infrastructure investments. The results are sobering, New York State has the nation's largest need for investments, at \$31.4 billion. The report states we need to invest in secondary wastewater treatment and new conveyance systems and their repairs; in small community wastewater treatment plants; and we need to reduce combined sewer overflows and reduce pollution from stormwater. Again, NY has the largest need for investments across the nation.

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- The first round of New York State water grants, established by the Governor and Legislature as part of the Water Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2015 has been an unprecedented success. \$50 million in grant funding was awarded to 45 projects across the state leveraging more than \$440 million in infrastructure improvements.
- The present Clean Water State Revolving Fund Intended Use Plan has \$10.1 billion of listed projects with estimated funds available of \$1.27 billion. It must be understood that the 10.1 billion is only for those projects where a municipality submitted an application through the NYS Environmental Facilities Corporation.
- According to a 2008 analysis by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, 30% of the wastewater collection systems in the State are beyond their expected useful life and the investment needed to maintain current service levels over the next 20 years is \$36.2 Billion, This year, a broad coalition of organizations representing environmental, municipal, utility, business and recreational interests has requested \$800 million in funding for water infrastructure to build on the success of the NYS Water Grants established by the Water Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2015.

There are over 600 wastewater utilities in NYS servicing more than 15 million people. Each plant has a permit, with the responsibility of a Chief Operator to make sure that plant is in compliance. There are over 2,600 operators in New York State. These clean water utilities provide a critical, often overlooked service to our residents, businesses and visitors.

For those of you who have visited your local wastewater utility, You understand this is your community's largest capital investment and these plants are complex utilities that include mechanical, chemical, and biological processes. Depending on the size of the plant, and the community it serves a wastewater operations specialist today has a wide-range of expertise to perform their everyday job.

Professional wastewater utilities throughout New York effectively and efficiently collect, transport and process the residential, commercial and manufacturing wastewater, thereby ensuring the economic viability of this great state.

According to the U.S. Treasury, infrastructure investments create good paying construction and manufacturing jobs, and are overwhelmingly supported by the public. It is estimated that a \$1B investment in water and wastewater infrastructure can create more than 26,000 jobs and the Department of

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Commerce estimates that for each job created in the local water and wastewater industry, 3.68 jobs are created in the national economy. The complexity of wastewater infrastructure improvements requires the combined efforts of planners, engineers, equipment manufacturers, distributors, contractors, and operators throughout the supply chain. 70% of the nation's engineering firms and 90% of general and heavy construction firms are small businesses. And as we know, small business is the backbone of the American economy.

In the mid-60's Governor Rockefeller decided to develop a program to clean up the polluted waters of the State – he titled it the Pure Waters program and the construction grants program followed. The people of the state of NY approved a billion dollar bond issue – in favor of clean water. The elements of that program were:

- Massive construction grants to municipalities
- Industrial incentives in the form of tax exemptions & development loans
- Abatement of pollution from federal & state facilities
- State aid for O&M for municipal sewage treatment facilities for up to one third of the cost
- A comprehensive statewide monitoring system
- Increased research on pollution problems
- Intensified enforcement of the water pollution control statute.

It was a program that became a precursor to the federal Clean Water Act and served as a national model. It is time for a new NY State Pure Waters Program.

Abundant, clean water is essential to public health, environmental quality and our economy. Too often we take for granted this resource and the “invisible” systems that bring it to us. We cannot afford to ignore these challenges, and need to work together to make the health and safety of our water a priority.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak before you today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

