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Water: A precious resource

AS I SEE IT
By Jamie Eldridge



In a recent editorial, the Telegram & Gazette said that "Americans already blessed with clean water supplies can probably skip the bottled water debates." Unfortunately, this line of reasoning assumes that we have an endless supply of clean water, and a well-maintained water infrastructure system to deliver that water.

We don't.

This past March may have shown that Massachusetts is not lacking in rainwater, but the many floods, wells shutting down, and the release of untreated wastewater across the commonwealth demonstrates that Massachusetts faces increasing challenges with its aging water infrastructure — and an expanding bottled water industry will only make the problem grow larger. I would argue that if we ignore the effect that the growing bottled water industry is having on our water supply, not to mention the toll decades of underfunded maintenance has had on our water infrastructure system, we may not be blessed with a clean water supply for very long.

Clean water is essential to the quality of life of the residents of our communities, and is a vital element for growth and productivity in our economy. The integrity of our water infrastructure system has a large impact on our public safety and our public health. The ability to fight fires, provide clean water to residents and businesses, and the ability to deal with wastewater without negatively impacting our rivers, streams, and groundwaters are all services our residents take for granted.

But our cities and towns are facing a water and wastewater crisis created by antiquated infrastructure and a failure to properly invest in maintaining existing infrastructure. Massachusetts cities and towns are responsible for maintaining over 125,000 miles of sewer pipes and over 100 municipal wastewater treatment plants, many of which are aging. Cities and towns maintain thousands of drinking water wells and over 200 surface water supplies. It is estimated by the EPA that \$8.5 billion is needed in Massachusetts to fund needed improvements to the state drinking water infrastructure.

And the longer we wait, the worse the problem grows. If we do nothing and maintain the status quo, the cost of protecting our clean water supplies — and thus, the cost of water — will only go up.

What does all this have to do with bottled water?

Up to 40 percent of bottled water comes directly from our public tap water systems. Dasani, Aquafina and other bottled water manufacturers take our tap water and sell it back to us at thousands of times the cost.

At the same time, the bottled water industry has built a \$15 billion U.S. market by casting doubts on public drinking water systems, and convincing the public that bottled water is safer, cleaner, and better tasting. One effect of this campaign has been that people across the country are losing confidence in public tap water — even though bottled water is actually less regulated than tap water. As the bottled water industry has grown, the political will to adequately fund public water systems in the U.S. has diminished.

At the same time, Massachusetts spends a little more than half a million dollars a year on bottled water for state offices and public events. At a time our public water system in Massachusetts needs billions of dollars in improvements, we can't afford to spend scarce public dollars on bottled water when we have clean, safe tap water readily available.

The Telegram & Gazette called this idea a "literal drop in the bucket." Maybe so, but all these drops in the bucket add up. Why not invest this \$500,000 a year in our public water system, rather than buying our own water back from bottled water corporations? It's the fiscally responsible *and* environmentally responsible thing to do.

This is just one small example of the many creative ideas I hope will come out of the newly formed Water Infrastructure Finance Commission, which I am proud to be chairing. This commission is charged with developing a comprehensive, long-range water infrastructure finance plan for the municipalities of the commonwealth.

Given the economic realities of the present economy we will need to be creative and strategic in the investments we make and the ways we fund the desperately-needed improvements to our water infrastructure system, while also being environmentally responsible.

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