

# GLWA CEO: The cost of delivering water is going up. Here's why

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Most of us don't think about water until it isn't there. It fills the coffee pot in the morning, allows us to wash dishes and flush toilets, runs at school sinks before class and keeps small businesses open for the day. For less than a penny per gallon, clean water shows up reliably and quietly, so embedded in our daily lives that it's easy to take for granted. That reliability, however, depends on infrastructure that across Michigan is aging faster than it's being replaced.

Much of the water system serving our region was built nearly a century ago, during periods of rapid industrial and population growth. Pipes and mains installed when Calvin Coolidge was president were never intended to last this long. Today, these systems are under mounting strain. "Sliding down the cliff" is more than a metaphor; it's the reality that GLWA and utilities across Michigan and the U.S. face daily, as small leaks and minor service interruptions signal a deeper, systemic decline.

At Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA), nearly half of our water transmission mains were built between the 1920s and 1960s. More than 220 miles of pipe, about a quarter of our system, now require replacement or decommissioning. Addressing that need represents roughly \$1.2 billion in additional investment.

To simply keep conditions from getting worse — not to expand or modernize — will require about \$75 million more every year, on an ongoing basis, dedicated to water main renewal.



It's a staggering figure but still far less expensive than what it costs to respond reactively to emergencies. Chronic underinvestment has left many systems in crisis mode. Last winter in Southwest Detroit, a single 54-inch main break required emergency evacuations and millions in repair costs, not to mention the disruption to families and businesses who had no choice but to wait for vital services to be restored. Multiply that by the hundreds of similar risks across the state and the scale of the problem becomes impossible to ignore.

When infrastructure fails, the consequences ripple quickly. Emergency repairs cost many times more than planned replacement of weakened pipes, especially in dense neighborhoods or during extreme weather. Businesses close. Families are displaced. Communities bear the cost of disruption. Planned investment, by contrast, allows work to happen deliberately, with notice, coordination and far less impact on daily life.

GLWA is not standing still. Each year, we invest hundreds of millions of dollars in capital improvements across the regional water and wastewater systems, with our planned capital spend of approximately \$471 million a year during each of the next five years. We use advanced inspection technology to assess pipes from the inside, target the highest-risk segments and renew infrastructure before catastrophic failure occurs. Since 2021, this approach has identified and addressed hundreds of vulnerable pipe segments that might otherwise have failed without warning.

We have also worked aggressively to control costs — refinancing debt to strengthen our bond rating, tightening budgets and keeping average water rate increases below inflation over the past decade, even as construction materials, chemicals and labor costs surged after the pandemic. These steps reflect a commitment to stewardship and affordability.

But there are limits to what local utilities can control. GLWA is funded almost entirely by what we charge our customers. We have no authority to levy taxes or millages. Bonding alone cannot solve a generational infrastructure challenge without placing unsustainable pressure on household bills now and into the future. Asking today's residents to shoulder the full cost of infrastructure originally built with

federal support decades ago raises serious questions of fairness and long-term affordability.



This challenge extends well beyond GLWA. Statewide, roughly 30% of Michigan’s water and sewer infrastructure is already in poor condition, and [regional estimates](#) show that billions of dollars annually are needed just to bring systems to fair or good condition. What’s required now is a shared solution, one that treats water infrastructure as the essential public good it is.

That means coordinating infrastructure investment so roads aren’t rebuilt only to be torn up again for aging water mains beneath them. It means modernizing state and federal funding programs to reward proactive, well-managed utilities, not only systems already in crisis. And it means developing sustainable funding approaches that don’t place the entire burden on ratepayers.

Stepping back from the cliff doesn't require dramatic gestures. It requires steady, sustained investment — paired with smart planning, accountability and partnership. When we act early, we protect public health, support local jobs, preserve affordability over time and avoid far greater costs down the road. The question isn't whether we can afford to invest in Michigan's water infrastructure. The question is how much longer we can afford not to.

*Suzanne Coffey is CEO of the Great Lakes Water Authority.*