

Decades of budget cuts behind Detroit water main breaks

James Brewer
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Major thoroughfares in downtown Detroit were closed Tuesday and water service shut off to many businesses due to flooding from the latest water main break in the city. Darryl Latimer, Deputy Director of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD), told the press, “The majority of the buildings in this area feed off that 24-inch main,” which apparently ruptured.

The area affected by this water main break is the Campus Martius, a downtown square adjacent to the Quicken Loans building. Latimer said he couldn’t predict when the repair would be completed and water service restored due to the limited time crews could stay out in the subfreezing weather. A DWSD public relations officer later told the WWS the flooding was a result of a valve rather than a main break, and had been resolved.

The breakdown in the city’s long-neglected infrastructure—which has included power outages that caused the shutdown of 30 public schools last month—takes place as Detroit’s emergency manager prepared to release his “plan of adjustment,” a bankruptcy restructuring plan that will impose even more savage cuts on city workers and the services they provide. On Tuesday, the City Council approved the privatization of public sanitation, a move that will lead to the auctioning off of the city’s entire fleet of garbage trucks.

The record cold winter has caused continual water main breaks throughout the city. According to an article in the *Detroit News* on the occasion of a break in a 30-inch main, which caused the flooding of a west side neighborhood, the backlog of unrepaired breaks had grown to 111 by the end of January from 53 at the end of December. The *News* reported that Detroit is on pace to break recent records for main breaks in 2006-07.

Similar breaks have occurred in the city’s southwest, northwest and eastside. In several cases motorists have had to be rescued by police and crews with heavy equipment when their automobiles got stuck in flooding waters. Single-digit temperatures have kept abandoned vehicles frozen in ice as deep as three feet.

The *News* reported the “likely” increase in maintenance costs and “budget challenges” as a result of Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr’s adjustment plan, which includes the spin-off of the city’s water department to a regional authority and the laying off 40 percent of the workforce. The move could be the first step to sale of one of the nation’s largest municipal water systems to private equity firms.

County leaders are balking at participation in Orr’s plan to regionalize the DWSD. Both Macomb and Oakland County executives Mark Hackel and L. Brooks Patterson have been cited by the *News* expressing concern that “Detroit’s deferred maintenance of the eight-county system would result in at least a doubling of water rates.”

DWSD’s Latimer blamed the cold weather for the hundreds of main breaks. He told the *News*, “It happens once the temperature drops outside and in the mains. It’s an older infrastructure with weak points that give way. It can be difficult to turn off the valves. We have to locate the manhole beneath the snow, remove the snow, remove the manhole and then go down to shut down the flow of water.”

Water main breaks are causing major problems in cities in Michigan and across the country. Pontiac and Bay City in Michigan, as well as Atlanta, Georgia, are experiencing catastrophes as a result of water mains giving way.

The water distribution infrastructure, like that of many US cities, can be over 150 years old in parts. The

Society of Civil Engineers, which estimates there are 240,000 water main breaks per year in the US, concluded in its assessment, “at the dawn of the 21st century much of our drinking water infrastructure is nearing the end of its useful life.” The cost for replacing the aging infrastructure over the coming decades could reach more than \$1 trillion, according to the American Water Works Association. Instead of meeting these pressing needs, last year, the Obama administration cut funding to water infrastructure programs.

Stephen Paraski, a disabled master plumber from the DWSD, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the infrastructure. “Whenever you’ve got the extremes in the temperatures, you have water main breaks. We averaged maybe 10 percent more in the coldest versus the hottest weather, but we got water main breaks in hot weather too. A lot of it can be attributed to lack of maintenance and the cutbacks over the past ten years in particular.”

Referred to the age of the infrastructure, he added, “In 1995, when we were replacing water mains in Eastern Market we removed an iron pipe that was put in in 1835. We dug up a section of this old cast iron pipe where there was about a six foot section of wood pipe that was still in use. The records show that was put in back in 1825 and then cast iron replaced it in 1835. It had been in service for that long. They used Tamarack logs to make the pipes then.”

Concerning the maintenance of the infrastructure, Paraski continued, “In the late nineties they stopped the policy of going through and issuing contracts for water main replacements. It got to be where we wouldn’t fix them until they broke. We had a job—a main break—at Harper and Moross on the eastside. Every time we repaired it, cut out a section, put on a clamp and turned it back on, it would break again further in.

“In the nineties we stopped the program of replacing projects in-house and virtually everything started getting farmed out to the contractors. Every day, I’d see private contractors coming and making 20-30 percent more than city workers. Now the water has been running from a broken main for six days because the DWSD doesn’t have the personnel anymore. On top of that, a couple of weeks ago they said they’re going to lay off 600 more DWSD workers. So what are they going to do? They’re going to give it all to

contractors.”

Paraski attended the Workers Inquiry into the Bankruptcy of Detroit and the Attack on the DIA & Pensions, sponsored by the Socialist Equality Party. “When I was there Saturday, I bought the book on the Workers Inquiry and I let a neighbor read it. She’s like, ‘How can this happen?’ I told her, ‘It’s happening!’ If every citizen of Detroit that would read that book, there would be outrage. I mean it’s disgusting what’s going on.”



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