

New Jersey Democrats authorize bonds to cover up Newark water crisis

Shuvu Batta
30 August 2019

On Tuesday, the Newark, New Jersey Municipal Council unanimously passed a measure to support a \$120 million bond issue by Essex County, the county in which the city is located, to finance the replacement of over 15,000 lead pipes that have contaminated the city's drinking water. Authorities have promised that the pipes can be replaced in less than three years.

The replacement program was pushed through the city council and county legislature before residents were given an opportunity to attend hearings or scrutinize details of the proposal. It replaces an earlier \$75 million program, which obligated homeowners to request a change, charged them \$1,000 each for repair services, and was scheduled to take 10 years to complete. Officials now say that a complete replacement can be completed in 24 to 30 months.

Erik Olson, a senior director at the National Resources Defense Council—the environmental group, which sued the city in order to get data about lead levels in home tap water—told the *New York Times* that he didn't "know of any other city of this size that has tried to replace all their lead service lines in this kind of time frame."

A dubious proposal from start to finish, it is being trumpeted by city and state Democratic politicians in a desperate effort to quell mass anger at the poisoning of potentially tens of thousands of people in the city of 285,000, New Jersey's largest.

Monday evening, a protest was organized outside of the MTV Video Music Awards show held in the Prudential Center in downtown Newark. Demonstrators chanted "We don't want no MTV, we want our water lead free" and five protesters were arrested.

Since most of the lead pipes are service lines buried under private property, the city can only start replacement once homeowners request it. Seventy

percent of Newark residents are renters and locating and obtaining permission from landlords itself would be a long process.

The city will be obliged to repay the county nearly \$6.2 million annually over the next 30 years. Newark's Democratic Mayor Ras Baraka insists that the city's funding to repay the county will come from the federal Environmental Protection Agency and that residents will not have to pay a dime. But it is unclear whether federal funding will arrive at all. The mayor penned a letter asking for financial assistance to President Donald Trump in January 2019 that has yet to be answered.

In a statement on the city's website, Baraka wrote that the bond issue was a "culmination of all of our efforts to create a permanent solution to eliminate the risks of lead by replacing all lead service lines in our City." Residents should not take any comfort in the words of the mayor who told the population that the water was safe to drink after it was definitively proven to have a lead content far above what the federal government has said are safe levels.

Likewise, New Jersey's Democratic Governor Phil Murphy tweeted, "It's time for us to fix our nation's aging water infrastructure. Thank you, Essex County, for stepping up to help accelerate Newark's lead service replacement effort."

Murphy, an alumnus of the Goldman Sachs investment bank and former finance chair for the Democratic National Committee with a net worth estimated to be in the range of several hundred million dollars, added: "Clean water is a right for every family and every community."

The architect of the bond program is Essex County Executive Joseph N. DiVincenzo Jr., a powerful political player in the state Democratic Party

nicknamed the “King of North Jersey,” who, like so many New Jersey politicians has been accused of wide-ranging corruption.

Lead is a neurotoxin and when ingested can lead to developmental disorders in children, anemia, and even hearing loss. At very high levels of consumption, it can be fatal.

City officials have known for years that lead was seeping into the water service lines but did nothing about it till it could no longer be ignored. Lead contamination was observed in 2011 in Newark’s public schools, but the city did not investigate further until the rediscovery of elevated lead levels in 2016 prompted the commissioning of a city-wide study a year later.

The city then handed out water filters to its residents, which officials said would make their water safe. That is, until testing earlier this month revealed the filters to be defective. It has now also been revealed that lead corrosion is present in the water systems of the surrounding towns of Bloomfield, Belleville, and Nutley.

In the face of an immense crisis, the response of the city’s political elite—overwhelmingly Democrats—has been criminally negligent.

The city is currently only supplying 15,000 out of the total 95,000 households with bottled drinking water. Each eligible household is given an entirely inadequate 48 bottles per week, when just for drinking purposes alone the average family of four would need around 128 bottles.

Working-class households are therefore forced to purchase bottled water in order to survive. In a city where nearly 30 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, purchasing bottled water is an immense financial burden for countless residents.

The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection estimates that 350,000 service lines in the entire state have lead components. It will cost roughly \$2.3 billion to replace all these lines.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact