Participation is the Key to Our Success

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I hope you all had a great Thanksgiving and are looking forward to the holidays and spending quality time with your family and friends. Our FSAWWA Fall Conference was a great opportunity to see so many of the fantastic men and women who work in our industry, and I hope you all had a great time at the 90th anniversary gala.

Reflecting back on one of my earlier columns, I urged all of you to participate in FSAWWA and in the state to advocate for our members and our mission for public health and preservation of the environment. Our membership continues to grow (over 19 percent in the past year), and with that, our voice in the water community.

In keeping with our mission, I have had the pleasure of working closely with the Utility Council and its officers and membership on regulatory and legislative initiatives. We are now focused on advocating for funding of drinking water infrastructure improvements, which is important given that the American Society of Civil Engineers has rated America’s infrastructure with a “D” grade.

A must-read on this issue is the American Water Works Association (AWWA) “Buried No More” report, which identifies a need for almost $1 trillion in investment for water infrastructure in this country by 2035. In the AWWA “State of the Water Industry” report, however, it was determined that most utilities don’t have the ability to cover the full cost of providing water service, including infrastructure replacement and expansion. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) Drinking Water Infrastructure Needs Survey and Assessment estimates that $384 billion will be needed to upgrade U.S. drinking water infrastructure by 2035. No matter what numbers we believe, it is a significant cost.

At the national level, the Senate responded to the need for infrastructure investment and approved S.2848, the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) of 2016, with a strong bipartisan vote of 95 to 3. This bill got strong support from AWWA, as well as twelve other water and municipal agencies across the country. This bill authorizes U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) projects for investment in navigation, flood management, and ecosystem restoration. It also designates $100 million for the State Revolving Fund (SRF) program and $70 million for the Water Infrastructure Finance and Reform Act (WIFIA), which was approved in 2014. Since then, Congress has only allocated $4.4 million to EPA for WIFIA administration and has, to date, not made any loans.

Recently, EPA personnel visited Florida and made a presentation on public outreach about the WIFIA program; they have held a series of these meetings throughout the country. Their hope was to clarify the goals of the program and to pave the way for successful applications to the WIFIA program once a financial commitment is made in the national budget. At the time of the meeting in Orlando, in October 2016, the national budget had not yet been set, but there was a mention that President Obama had included funding in his budget proposal for the credit subsidy necessary to make this program go forward. Since the budgets are not yet approved and will now wait until after the election results are in and the new Congress is seated, there is no dedicated funding beyond the funds allocated to EPA to do the administrative work to begin the WIFIA application process.

Getting a WIFIA loan is not guaranteed or easy, but the process is still being developed and is in the approval stage with the Office of Management and Budget. The WIFIA projects can vary in size depending on the size of the community; the minimum project is $5 million for small communities serving a population of 25,000 or less, and the large projects have a minimum size of $20 million. The WIFIA loans can only fund 49 percent of the project, so the community requesting the loan will need to bring some money to the table.

The application process is iterative and involves several steps in review. Based on what attendees said at the Orlando meeting, there are several shovel-ready projects that some communities would like to submit right away. We should continue to let our senators and representatives know that this is important funding for the water community and needs to be included as the budget moves forward.

We don’t want to lose funding to SRF programs to fund WIFIA—we believe there is room in the budget to fund both, as WIFIA is a budget-neutral program. The Senate also looked at WRDA as a means to provide investment to help communities reduce public health risks related to lead and to help smaller rural systems fund technology improvements.

After the events in Flint, Mich., this need is evident; it cannot be funded by the already overburdened Flint community. We know that funding for lead removal and water line replacement is important, but it should not be the sole focus of a national water infrastructure finance bill. The House of Representatives WRDA Bill H.R. 5303 emphasizes it as a way to fund inland waterway projects, port improvements, and flood protection, which all drive the economy. There is $170 million for water infrastructure needs, but it does not designate SRF or WIFIA funding.

There was also language about lead. Much of the lead discussion in this bill is about notification to the public when lead action levels are exceeded, but as we know, in Flint the action level was never exceeded during monitoring, even though real problems existed in its system. The House and Senate committees will conference about these bills and hopefully come together with a budget proposal that provides funding for both WIFIA and SRF.

More information about WIFIA can be found at http://www.epa.gov/wifia. Please contact your representatives who are on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee at www.house.gov, and for the Senate, contact the Environment and Public Works Committee at www.epw.senate.gov.

It is essential that we all participate at the local, state, and national levels in the discourse on water infrastructure funding. We need to continue to review and evaluate new rules and bills to make sure that they adequately evaluate the needs of the water community, both financially and to protect public health. The needs are great and cannot be supported entirely by rate payers. The AWWA office of governmental affairs does an outstanding job keeping us connected at the national level, and the Utility Council does so at the state level. I encourage you to stay connected and participate in the process. Join us in Tallahassee and Washington, D.C., when we talk to our representatives and senators about water issues.

It’s hard to believe my year as chair has come to an end, but my service to the section will continue as long as they need or want me to participate. I appreciate the opportunities that were given to me to serve the Florida Section. I am sure that Dr. Grace Johns will serve our members well in the coming year as our new FSAWWA chair.