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Bills to fund water infrastructure introduced at the Legislature

CGMC calls on legislators to pass $128M in funding for critical clean water infrastructure projects

ST. PAUL—As communities across the state grapple with aging water treatment facilities and rising construction costs, Greater Minnesota city leaders are on calling on the Legislature to pass a bonding bill this year that includes $128 million for clean water infrastructure.

"Cities are the front line of protecting our lakes and rivers from pollution and making sure residents have clean water," said Ron Johnson, a member of the Bemidji City Council and president of the Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities (CGMC). "We are proud to play a role preserving Minnesota's clean water legacy, but cities simply don't have the resources to make the necessary improvements to their water facilities without assistance from the state."

A bipartisan bill introduced today at the Minnesota Legislature aims to keep up with the growing demand for state funding to help cities offset the costs to upgrade and rebuild water treatment plants and other clean water infrastructure. SF 587/HF 411, authored by Sen. Gary Dahms (R-Redwood Falls) and Rep. Jeanne Poppe (DFL-Austin), provides $128 million in general appropriation bonds to the Minnesota Public Facilities Authority (PFA) for water infrastructure grant and loan programs available to cities.

"We're thankful that Sen. Dahms and Rep. Poppe are stepping up to the plate to address the dire need for more funding for water infrastructure," Johnson said. "Cities across the state—and especially in Greater Minnesota—will benefit from this legislation."

The funding allocated under SF 587/HF 411 is especially critical this year as several cities have been forced to put important projects on hold after funding approved by the Legislature in 2018 hit a major snag. The bonding bill signed into law last spring included $59 million for the PFA programs; however, a group of nine environmental groups initiated a lawsuit against the state challenging the funding mechanism used in the bill. As a result of the lawsuit, money that many cities were anticipating is now in limbo.

The $128 million funded under SF 587/HF 411 is the amount needed to keep up with the growing demand for PFA grants and loans and cover the amount that has been indefinitely held up due to the lawsuit.

“The longer we have to wait for funding, the more expensive our project becomes,” said Little Falls Mayor Greg Zylka, whose city is among those affected by the funding delay.

Zylka said Little Falls was slated to receive a $7 million grant to upgrade its treatment plant to reduce pollutants in wastewater that flows into the Mississippi River. Without the state grant, the entire $22 million project cost would fall on city residents and businesses.

Little Falls is not alone. Austin, Marshall and Mountain Lake are also near the top of the project priority list and were hoping to receive funding through the 2018 bonding bill. In total, more than 300 cities in Minnesota currently have water infrastructure projects in the works. According to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, more than $5 billion is needed over the next 20 years for water and wastewater infrastructure.

“Cities need help now – and that need is only going to grow as time goes on,” Zylka said. “The Legislature must pass funding this year with the full $128 million request.”

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The Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities is a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy organization representing 97 cities outside of the Twin Cities metropolitan area. The Coalition educates legislators about issues important to Greater Minnesota. Visit the CGMC online at greatermncities.org and follow us on Twitter @greatermncities.