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Greater Minnesota city leaders: Success of 2020 legislative session hinges on passage of large public works bill

ALEXANDRIA, MINN.—City leaders from Greater Minnesota are calling on Governor Tim Walz and legislators to pass a large public works package that invests at least $1.5 billion in infrastructure needs throughout the state.

That message was the main theme that emerged from this week’s CGMC Fall Conference, which was attended by more than 115 elected officials and city staff members from across Greater Minnesota. At the annual two-day event, CGMC members adopted the organization’s policy positions and discussed legislative priorities for the upcoming session.

“The success or failure of the 2020 legislative session depends on the passage of a large bonding bill that meets the needs of our communities,” said Audrey Nelsen, a member of the Willmar City Council and president of the Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities (CGMC).

In addition to local projects for individual communities, Nelsen said there are several important statewide programs and initiatives that should be funded through the bonding bill. The most pressing need, she said, is funding for clean water infrastructure grant and loan programs administered through the Public Facilities Authority (PFA). The PFA programs help cities pay for repairs and upgrades to their water treatment facilities — without these state programs, the costs would fall solely on local homeowners and businesses.

“The building block of any bonding bill should be $200 million in funding for clean water infrastructure,” Nelsen said. “Cities are facing massive costs to fix aging plants and keep up with new water quality regulations. State funding through the bonding bill is absolutely vital.”

City leaders said that other important priorities for Greater Minnesota that should be addressed through the 2020 bonding bill include funding for child care facilities, local roads, public infrastructure to support housing needs and additional money for the Greater Minnesota Business Development Public Infrastructure (BDPI) program, which provides grants to help cities pay for infrastructure needed to help spur private business growth.

The Legislature and Gov. Walz have been busy this fall touring potential projects, which Nelsen said is a positive sign that lawmakers are eager to get to work on a bonding bill when they reconvene in February. However, she noted that one of the biggest hurdles might be convincing lawmakers to pass a bill that is big enough to make an impact.
“The state can afford to pass a sizable bonding bill,” Nelsen said, noting that the state’s debt capacity currently exceeds $3 billion. “Now is the time to invest in important projects that will make critical improvements and create jobs all across Minnesota.”

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The Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities is a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy organization representing 100 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 on Twitter @greatermncities.