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A Need for Concerted Action

Posted By John Trotti [Comments](#)

When you look around at your community, how difficult is it to recognize what infrastructure systems are held together with baling wire and duct tape. Chances are your MSW system is relatively free of such make-do fixes, and even if things turn to worms you can probably find the means for getting the trash off the curb and out of sight without declaring an all-out emergency. But can you say the same about your water conveyance systems; your electrical grid; your streets, roads, and highways ... systems that have evolved over generations and will take generations to repair? How would you like to be on the hook for a sewage system that was built 80 years ago to handle a tenth of the load it has today? Make your heart miss a beat or two? Maybe you get the feeling you're not so bad off by comparison? If you do, don't get complacent.

If you look at what's being done to deal with deteriorating or inadequate infrastructure in the face of ever-increasing demands of urbanization—or more to the point, suburbanization—you may begin to suspect that not only do many of our communities face a challenge that is daunting, but also that a patch-paint-and-pray approach may be leading us into a dead-end situation.

Why Bother Me With Someone Else's Problems?

Unless you control the printing press that doles out the money it takes to run your department, it *is* your problem, since you're up against the needs of your peers who more than likely are up to their eyeballs in infrastructure woes. To make matters worse for you, MSW is a stealth business, partly because you do a good job in keeping it out of the public eye, but also because its major expenditures are for operations rather than capital items. In fact, about the only times you come to the public's notice is when you get hit by a strike or want to build or expand a facility. Beneath the façade, however, lurks the recognition that times are changing and that waste receipts at the landfill gate are falling—partly in response to the economic downturn and partly because we've set in motion diversion programs aimed at reducing disposal, but also because of fundamental changes in the way many products are delivered...news and entertainment items, for instance.

After all, what's the value of all of your good work when another of your community's critical services—electric, gas, transportation, water, or sewer—fails? Over the last half-century, we have undergone a transition from a rural to an urban society, a trend that is accelerating, taxing our ability to provide new services, and overwhelming many of those already in existence. I've listened to estimates for the repair, replacement, and upgrade of our existing water infrastructure between now and mid-century range from \$15 trillion to \$30 trillion ... figures, mind you, predicated on fighting a rear-guard action. Road repairs, right-of-way demands, and new highway construction could add another 50% to the total. It's one thing to ask where such amounts of money might come from—theoretically where much of the stimulus funds were to be applied—but quite another to question our society's ability to actually mobilize itself to utilize such an investment. In short, even if we could find the funds, could we actually deploy them in a meaningful way?

Now is the time for us to forge alliances with our peers in order to make sure that our essential programs aren't overwhelmed by crises in someone else's bailiwick. But even that falls short of the real point. What is needed is the determination to rise above politics in order to provide our elected officials with the strategies and courage to address the real rather than "correct" issues of our times. This will take all the character and leadership we can muster if we are to leave to those who follow a standard of living at least as good as the one we inherited.