

## OUR VIEW: Upstate infrastructure must be a priority

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Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, center, visits the site of a water main break on Barringer Road in Ilion. It was the first of three water main breaks the village suffered in as many during a recent cold snap. (PHOTO COURTESY OF THE GOVERNOR'S OFFICE)

State Sen. Joseph Griffo isn't just spouting political bluster when he says there needs to be parity between downstate and upstate when it comes to infrastructure investments.

The facts back him up.

· Three years ago a state audit by Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli's office found nearly half of the water flowing through the Mohawk Valley Water Authority's system was disappearing somewhere.

Some of that loss might have been attributed to the fact that it was unmetered. But a large part of the loss was due to underground leaks caused by an aging water system.

· In a report issued last November, the national nonprofit TRIP organization estimated that New York drivers are, on average, each losing \$2,768 a year because of poor, unsafe roads and bridges and traffic jams. Locally, TRIP estimated that due to inadequate state and local funding, 33 percent of major roads and highways in the Utica area are in poor or mediocre condition. Ten percent of the area's major urban roads are in poor condition and 23 percent are in mediocre condition. Driving on rough roads costs the average driver in the Utica area \$309 annually in extra vehicle operating costs, including accelerated vehicle depreciation, additional vehicle repair costs, increased fuel consumption and increased tire wear.

The deteriorating upstate highway infrastructure has long been a hot topic, brought to the front burner following the April 5, 1987, collapse of the Thruway bridge over the Schoharie Creek near Amsterdam, sending 10 people to their deaths as vehicles plunged from the highway into the creek below. Federal investigators blamed deficient

construction techniques and flaws in the state's inspection standards. The tragedy brought about notable changes requiring more rigorous bridge inspections every two years and underwater inspections of bridge piers every five years.

Meanwhile, it's no secret that the pipes we depend on to transport our water have seen better days. That became crystal clear a few weeks ago when a century-old water main broke and flooded downtown, damaging businesses (including the Observer-Dispatch) and snarling traffic. More recently, three water main breaks in Ilion created havoc in that community, including closed roads and boil-water orders. Mohawk Valley Water Authority Executive Director Patrick Becher says there are as many as five water main breaks a day during the cold weather due to aging pipes. And winter is far from over.

Still, while Gov. Cuomo looks to pump billions of dollars into New York City's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), Griffo argues that Upstate New York has infrastructure needs that are just as important.

"While roads and bridges are crumbling in Upstate New York, Democrats in the Senate, many with ties to New York City, seem more interested in fixing the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) than addressing the infrastructure needs of Upstate New York," Griffo stated in a news release following a joint legislative hearing on transportation last week. "I understand that fixing the MTA and New York City's transportation issues are important, but I would like to see parity in the investments between upstate and downstate for transportation as well as underground infrastructure. Upstate cannot wait for infrastructure issues in New York City to be resolved. We need assistance now."

Griffo is right. Upstate infrastructure needs cannot be ignored at the expense of the MTA. Current spending on local roads isn't even close to keeping pace with pavement and bridge needs, according to a report from the New York State Association of Town Superintendents of Highways, Griffo said. Over \$1.3 billion in additional revenue is needed annually to meet these needs. Without it, the deterioration of the pavement and bridge infrastructure will accelerate and will adversely impact motorists and the economy.

The fix won't be cheap. Consider the aging water system. Two years ago, Becher said that many of the water lines in the 700-mile system are 150 years old, and since 2000, MVWA has spent \$55 million on line replacements and other improvements. If the authority replaced two miles of line per year at

\$175 per linear foot (nearly \$1 million per mile) it would cost \$2 million annually and take 350 years to replace the entire line.

Older lines are replaced as breaks occur, and the Authority has taken steps to reduce water loss through a proactive leak detection program. But it's a constant struggle, especially in the bone-chilling weather. Cuomo knows this.

"Cold weather makes everything worse," he said during a visit to the Ilion Municipal Building Jan. 31. "This was a very bad water main break ... and it's depleted the water reserves."

Cuomo deployed 40,000 bottles of water and two Water Buffalo water trailers from the state's emergency stockpiles to support Ilion residents, but said that providing the water only fixes a "short-term problem." He said the "long-term problem" needs to be fixed, which includes improving the aging water pipes.

To the state's credit, there has been some help. In October 2017 more than \$14 million in grants were awarded to several municipalities in Herkimer and Oneida counties through the state's Water Infrastructure Improvement Act, as well as the new Intermunicipal Water Infrastructure Grants Program. The grant applications were for upgrades and replacements for drinking water systems, filtration plants and water mains, as well as the construction or enhancement of wastewater treatment plants, pump stations, and sewer systems.

A year later, \$25.2 million in grants was awarded to support 14 critical municipal water infrastructure projects in the Mohawk Valley, again funded through the state's Water Infrastructure Improvement Act and Intermunicipal Grant programs. Among local municipalities receiving grants for water upgrade projects were the village of Camden, town of Verona, cities of Rome and Utica and Oneida County, and village of Ilion in Herkimer County.

But needs remain. Gov. Cuomo spent considerable time in his State of the State/budget address talking about fixing the MTA.

"Less certain," said Griffo, "is the specific amounts that are going to be allocated to upstate communities for road, bridges, rural transportation hubs and other infrastructure needs such as broadband, gas, electric and sewer."

He has vowed to fight for it. Every other upstate lawmaker must join him. A weak infrastructure will be a detriment to future development and the upstate economy. We must not let that happen.