

OPINION

This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.

■ **FOR SUBSCRIBERS**

Yanez: Water affordability legislation should be a priority

Henry Yanez The Detroit News

Published 8:01 p.m. ET June 6, 2024 | Updated 8:01 p.m. ET June 6, 2024

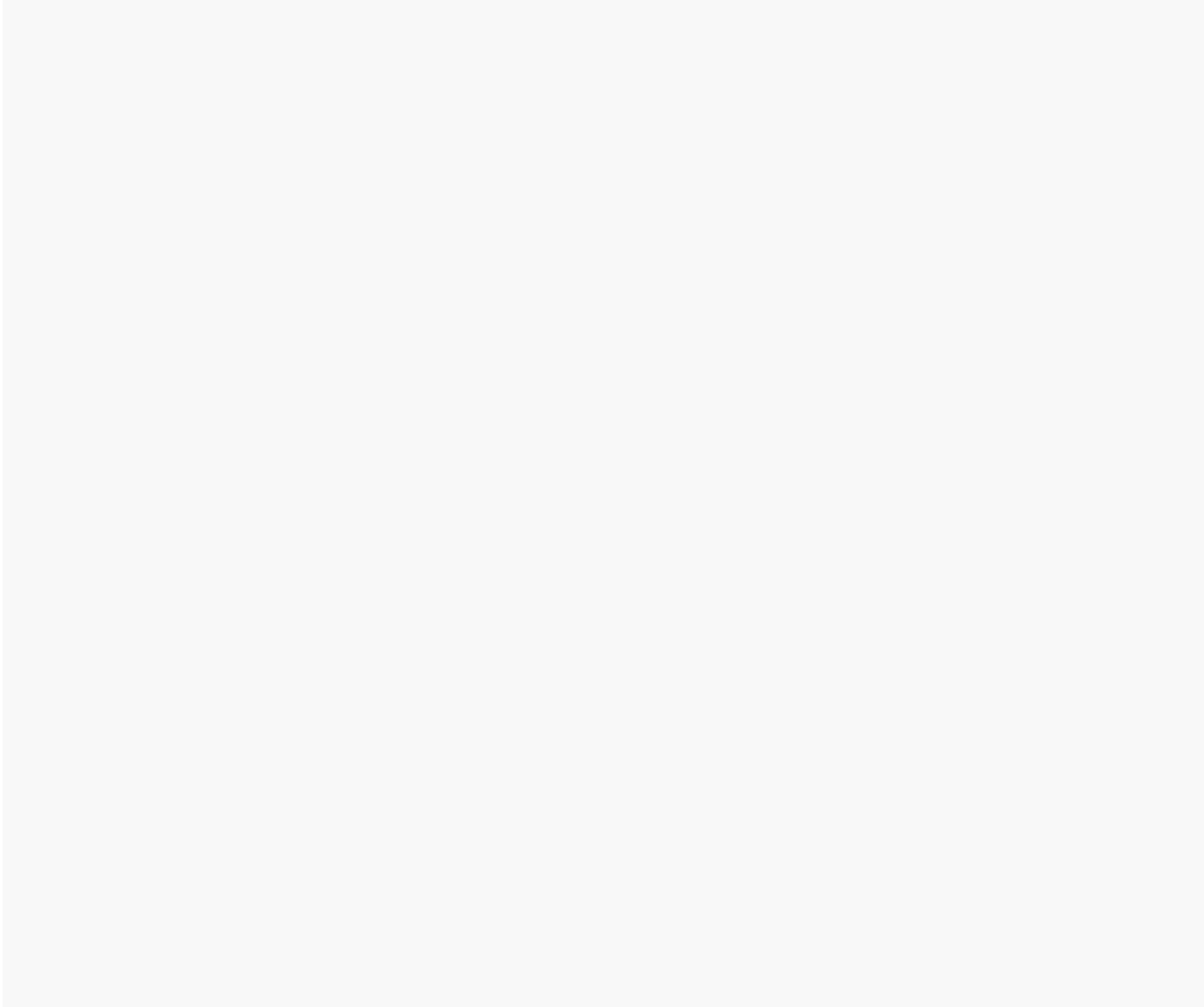
In the last several years, we have seen mounting problems with American municipal water systems. These problems range from the high-profile failure of Flint to the agricultural contamination issues in central California to the PFAS exposure issue popping up all over the country. America has a drinking water problem.

Aging infrastructure has failed in many places around the country due to chronic underinvestment by municipalities that are strapped for cash and facing the rising cost of materials and labor. Whether it is leaking pipes or systems damaged by natural disasters, cities and towns are often thrust into emergency situations because of a poor track record of investing in maintenance and upgrades to their municipal water systems.

In Michigan, we have cities and small towns that struggle to maintain their municipal water systems. Lack of investment, coupled with crushing bad debt from customer's unpaid bills, leaves these systems vulnerable and struggling to afford necessary maintenance.

Proposed legislation in Lansing aims to support municipal water systems by creating a Water Affordability Fund to help those struggling to pay their water bills.

Michigan, like many states, has a water affordability problem. It is estimated that more than 317,000 households with more than 800,000 occupants are behind on their water bills. A 2022 report by the University of Michigan, Michigan State University and Safe Water Engineering found that while the water affordability crisis is well-documented in cities like Detroit and Flint, it is also impacting suburbs and rural towns.



The Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA) recently reported that Macomb County has already used up available water affordability funds through the WRAP program. Additionally, GLWA estimates that statewide water affordability legislation would allow 29,320 households in Macomb County to qualify for water assistance — 55 times more than the current number of households now receiving water assistance in our county.

The Water Affordability Fund legislation would create statewide water shutoff protections and a user-fee financed fund to help low-income families and senior citizens avoid water shutoffs. The legislation is modeled after a program piloted in Detroit last year, the Detroit Water and Sewer

Department's Lifeline Plan, that is helping more than 28,000 households address past-due balances and have an affordable monthly bill.

Under the legislation, monthly water bills for enrolled households would be no more than 3% of the household's annual income with sustainable funding through a \$2 per month user-fee on water bills. The bills outline a notification process for water providers that requires they contact delinquent customers at least three times before shutting off service for nonpayment. They also prohibit water providers from shutting off service or putting a lien on property taxes of customers enrolled in the state's Water Affordability Program. And they direct funds for plumbing repairs up to \$2,500 per house and pay off arrearages up to \$3,000 over two years of successful enrollment in the program.

The \$2 monthly user fee on every water meter in Michigan, or \$24 a year, is responsible public policy. It creates a way to help those in need pay their bills and contribute to the financial health and sustainability of our local water department, because it reduces the need for an increase in rates more than necessary just to cover bad debt from uncollected water bills. Just as importantly, the Water Affordability Fund will allow local water systems to invest sooner in

critical maintenance and upgrades, reducing the need for big rate increases to cover significant repairs that occur due to long-term underfunding and overdue maintenance.

In Sterling Heights, Macomb County and across Michigan, this is a simple case of pay now or pay later.

Henry Yanez serves on the Sterling Heights City Council.

