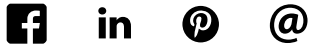


Opinion: All need access to safe, affordable water

BY KERRY BAUGHMAN

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In northwest Michigan, we don't need to be told that water is vital for life. We are surrounded by the majesty of Lake Michigan, and many of us spend long summer days enjoying any one of the dozens of inland lakes in our region.

While basic living costs have increased, incomes have remained stagnant in Michigan.

The result is that households spent a larger portion of their income on water in 2018 than they did in 1980.



Baughman

New legislation in Lansing seeks to address this growing water affordability issue. Senate Bills 549-552 would create a water affordability program funded by a surcharge on water utility bills.

This directly mirrors the Michigan Energy Assistance Program (MEAP), which was passed with bipartisan support a decade ago and has been helpful for many of our neighbors, keeping the heat on during the winter for those on fixed incomes and hard-working families struggling to meet basic needs.

The water affordability bill package would ensure that lower income households (under 200% of the federal poverty level) would pay 3% or less of their household income for water.

Any gap between that number and household water usage, along with up to \$1,500 in arrearages and \$2,500 in plumbing repairs, would be made up to the water provider by the fund.

Water providers would implement notice provisions to those facing a potential shutoff with the goal of getting those struggling to enroll in the affordability program.

We have many neighbors in Northwest Michigan who enjoy rural living in our community, usually on a fixed income, and often elderly.

For neighbors such as these, a sudden medical emergency or job loss can be a financial blindside, and a new water affordability program will be able to ensure that our neighbors do not lose access to their drinking water.

Legislators are working to ensure that water affordability funding collected in northern Michigan stays in northern Michigan.

This is a positive change for our rural communities with unique needs and challenges.

Financial vulnerability exists in our community, and it comes in many shapes and sizes.

From the elderly rural homeowner on a fixed income to the young working family living in Traverse City, sudden expenses can leave many in our community vulnerable. Senate Bills 549-552 would go a long way to address water affordability in the Great Lakes state.

Lawmakers from across the aisle are coming together to ensure that all residents have access to safe, affordable water.

We should encourage them to pass this legislation to keep water affordable for every community in Michigan, including northern Michigan.

About the Author: Kerry Baughman has been the executive director of Northwest Michigan Community Action Agency since 2018. She is also a member of the Michigan Commission on Community Action and Economic Opportunity.

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