



WATER SUMMIT EVENT

Written Testimony

I am pleased to have the opportunity to address the Summit on the subject of Water Equity as it relates to the citizens and the City of Benton Harbor, MI. As I suspect most are aware, the Benton Harbor has undergone a series of issues related to its ability to provide clean potable water to its citizens. One of the issues involved deficiencies in the level and quality of maintenance and administration at the water treatment plant. Benton Harbor like a number of other cities has experienced difficulty being able to hire and maintain adequately trained and certified workers needed to ensure the level and quality of maintenance, operation, and distribution required to provide the level of service desired.

Secondly is the matter of the urgent need for replacement of lead water lines and fixtures containing lead where the levels of lead in the drinking water exceeded the federal recommended limit of .15 in some of the water tests. The lead line matter and the resultant inability to drink the water, use it for cooking, brushing teeth and other personal uses certainly highlighted the importance and significance of the water equity needs of the City and it's mostly low income minority citizens. Within that American promise of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, has to be included safe reliable quality drinking water just like clean air to breathe. Fortunately for the City, when our problem was discovered and elevated to the level of Statewide and even national news, following the situation in Flint, our Governor Whitmer stepped up to the plate and initiated action at the State level to help Benton Harbor address its lead water line problem. As a result of her leadership, the State provided \$45 million to address the lead line replacement project within eighteen (18) months that would have otherwise taken the city in excess of twenty (20) years, placing its population at extreme high risk. Under the city's financial circumstances, there would have been little to no chance of being able to achieve this objective. Even the City's allocation of American Rescue Plan funding (ARPA) would have barely put a dent in the problem.

Many cities around the country that has housing built before the 70's will have some of the same problems with lead lines, and depending upon the extent of them, will need Federal and State help. The problem will be far greater in minority neighborhoods where most of the older housing can be found. The effects of lead upon human lives and especially those of children make it such that cities cannot afford to wait or take the extended periods of time to address the problem.

Along with water quality concerns, it is also critical that water be affordable. As a result of the actions of a previous State administration's Emergency Managers, the City of Benton Harbor lost a number of its significant water customers, leaving the City with a plant that produces 11 million gallon per day, and only uses one (1) million gallons per day. The cost of maintaining and operating a facility with this unused capacity has resulted in a significant

financial drain on the City of Benton Harbor's general fund. Any additional cost for the City without State and Federal assistance would have had a significant impact on the affordability of its water for its citizens. The City was already dealing with the impact of prior rate increases to cover bonds issued to upgrade the water plant in past years, before the current capacity problem developed.

As the City approaches the finish line, expected to be next spring, there is still another challenge that lingers associated with the lead line replacement issue – a significant deficit from non-payment of water bills during the period that citizens could not drink the water. Many felt as though they should not pay for water that they either could not use or had such limited uses. It was hoped that the State might assist with water-credits to underwrite some of this unpaid amount.

One of the ways in which the City of Benton Harbor might utilize infrastructure investment and Jobs Act funding to address and make further progress on the identified water equity need would be by awarding sufficient amounts of those funds to the city and allowing their use to address the operational, maintenance, and distribution needs that the city is still trying to address. This would serve to stop part of the financial bleeding of the city carrying the cost burden of operating a now oversized plant until it can find new, perhaps industrial, customers to reduce that overhead. These funds could also help the city with unmet needs to be addressed in its wastewater/sewer distribution system.

On the subject of urban flooding, fortunately most of the residential areas of Benton Harbor are on higher ground. The City sits right on Lake Michigan, with the St. Joseph River, the Paw Paw River, Ox Creek and Willow Creek connecting into Lake Michigan. From time to time, we experience high lake levels that do cause water to back up into these tributaries, negatively impacting the City's commercial and business areas. This all has a direct impact on the water table in these lower lying areas, and negatively impacts the City of Benton Harbor's ability to develop its waterfront on the St. Joseph and Paw Paw rivers. These Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act monies could enable the City to address these issues and further its development economically, expanding its tax base, jobs, and opportunities in the best interests of its underserved populace.

Mayors of our cities are absolutely essential key partners with State and Federal governments in delivering transformative infrastructure improvement at the local level in this country. There is no one else as close to the problems or as directly involved.

Marcus Muhammad
Mayor
City of Benton Harbor