Please see our report card on all of the positive results the Cities Initiative has achieved to support our members this past year.

This year proved to be a difficult one for municipalities in the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River Basin, with ongoing financial pressures from surging inflation and a variety of extreme weather events across the region.

The need for climate action and improved municipal funding has never been higher. The Cities Initiative is there, and will continue to be there, to support your needs.

We continue to champion causes that reinforce the socio-economic and environmental health of our communities and we have proven to deliver results when we work together and leverage our collective voice. This report card reviews our progress and grades us on our success in achieving results for our members.
STRENGTHENED GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR GREAT LAKES AND ST. LAWRENCE RIVER BASIN COMMUNITIES

The Cities Initiative has advanced key priorities and secured funding for basin communities. Key successes include:

- A successful push for historic $420 million in funding for Great Lakes protection, out of a $650 million announced for freshwater programming by the Government of Canada. Enhanced funding for the St. Lawrence River will be announced this fall.
- The launch of the Canada Water Agency this fall following years of advocacy by the Cities Initiative and our members.
- Advocating successfully for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to incorporate updated data on lead service lines in the 7th Drinking Water Infrastructure Needs Survey and Assessment, improving the distribution of federal dollars for lead service line replacement to Great Lakes states.

ELEVATED MAYORS’ VOICES IN OTTAWA, WASHINGTON AND ACROSS THE BASIN

The Cities Initiative increased its relevance as a leading voice in our national capitals and across the basin for our mayors. Key successes in Canada and the United States include:

- Co-hosting a Summit on Fresh Water in Ottawa, attended by six Cities Initiative members, other freshwater groups, Senators, Members of Parliament and Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Steven Guilbeault, to highlight the need for enhanced freshwater funding.
- The participation of more than 12 members in Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Days on the Hill in Ottawa, a two-day event of advocacy and direct engagement with Cabinet Ministers, Members of Parliament, Senators and key political staff and federal government officials.
- Partnering with Climate Proof Canada for the first-ever National Climate Change Adaptation Summit to showcase the need for greater investment and policy action by the federal government to prepare Canadian communities and businesses for the impacts of climate change.
- Organizing a binational delegation of six members to travel to Washington for Great Lakes Day, holding more than a dozen meetings with U.S. Members of Congress – including Senator Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin – along with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to discuss our federal priorities.
- Partnering with the Mississippi River Cities and Towns Initiative to host an exclusive dinner in Washington, attended by approximately 30 U.S. and Canadian members from both organizations and two senior White House officials: Mitch Landrieu, Senior Advisor and Infrastructure Coordinator, and Ali Zadi, National Climate Advisor.
- Issuing more than 20 news releases that generated over 100 articles and impressions in media outlets across the basin, including a published op-ed in Canada’s largest daily newspaper.

POSITIONED MAYORAL COMMISSIONS FOR INFLUENCE

The Cities Initiative’s mayoral commissions continued to build policy influence and contribute to policy change at all levels. Key successes in Canada and the United States include:

- Joining the Biden-Harris Get the Lead Out Partnership to guide implementation to accelerate lead service line replacement across the United States while supporting a delegation of Mayors Commission on Water Equity members – led by Mayor Cavalier Johnson of Milwaukee – at the partnership’s launch at a White House event featuring U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris.
- Organizing meetings between the Mayors Commission on Coastal Resilience (MCCR) and other member mayors with Brigadier General Kimberly Peeples, Commander of the Great Lakes and Ohio River Division of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to discuss municipal engagement with the Great Lakes Coastal Resiliency Study.
- Bringing attention to the need for a made-in-Canada Great Lakes Coastal Resiliency Study through the MCCR and signing a memorandum of cooperation with Conservation Ontario to further develop the scope of this study to support future advocacy efforts.
- Launching the Mayors Commission on Water Equity and Infrastructure in Canada to push for a dedicated water infrastructure funding program and improvements to the municipal financing framework.
- Testifying before the National Assembly Environment Committee in Québec during consultations around legislation to increase provincial water royalties by 900 percent, a key initiative led by our newly-formed Quebec Advisory Council that was adopted and will be implemented in January 2024.
We know how difficult it is for our members to implement key infrastructure projects when you have limited resources and several priorities with limited funding. Our goal is to be on the ground with you as you build out sustainable solutions to reduce flooding, protect your shoreline and provide improved water infrastructure to your community. In 2023, the Cities Initiative secured nearly $2 million in new U.S. federal grants to expand coastal resilience programming and laid the groundwork to build up our programming in Canada. Key successes include:

Resilient Coastal Projects Initiative (RCPI):
- Securing $1.5 million in additional funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to continue and expand the RCPI through 2025
- Finalizing RCPI project concepts for 8 communities in Wisconsin and 15 communities in Southeast Michigan, with project advancement assistance continuing into 2024
- Providing RCPI project development support to ten communities in West Michigan and six communities in Indiana, including assistance with pre-applications to state and federal funding programs. Project advancement assistance will continue into 2024
- Launching RCPI in the Western Lake Superior Basin (Minnesota and Wisconsin), Lake Huron (Northeast Michigan) and Lake Erie (Ohio)
- Developing a pilot project concept for RCPI in Canada and submitting two applications to support the program

Initiative for Resilient Great Lakes Coasts (IRGLC):
- Supporting ten projects through the design phase through the IRGLC, including communities along Lake Michigan in Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin
- Securing nearly $850,000 through a cooperative agreement with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to expand the IRGLC program through 2028

ADVANCED EDUCATION AROUND CLIMATE ACTION AND OTHER KEY ISSUES
The Cities Initiative put in motion a concerted effort to help our members take measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and prepare for the impacts of climate change. Key activities this year include:
- Hosting four hands-on workshops on building up and rolling out plans to reduce emissions and prepare their communities for climate change at our 20th anniversary annual conference which was attended by over 160 people
- Advancing a member resolution – sponsored by Mayor Justin M. Bibb of Cleveland and accompanied by a pledge by the Board of Directors – committing the Cities Initiative to continue to support members’ climate action plan development and implementation
- Organizing nine webinars and virtual roundtables with outside experts and high-ranking officials, including leadership from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Canada Water Agency

SUPPORTED OUR MOST VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES
This year, we launched the Richard M. Daley Water Equity Community Award (Daley Award) and the Turtle Island Scholarship to open doors for a greater diversity of communities in the basin. Highlights of our work to expand our membership with vulnerable and Indigenous communities include:
- Providing six communities with the Daley Award in 2023 with a complimentary Cities Initiative membership and access to valuable program and policy resources to ensure everyone has a seat at the table
- Identifying key issues facing each community through engagement with our Mayors Commission on Water Equity and offering tailored technical support to advance sustainable solutions, including engineering and financing assistance
- Expanding our board of directors with two positions reserved for leaders from Indigenous communities in the basin, including the election of our first Indigenous director, Grand Chief Kahsennenhawe Sky-Deer of Kahnawà:ke

OVERALL GRADE: A-
The Cities Initiative continues to deliver results for our member communities through our programming and policy work. Despite a challenging political and fiscal environment in our national capitals, we have been key advocates for enhanced funding for freshwater protection and water infrastructure improvements. We will continue to champion these investments for the well-being of our communities.

We are also laying the groundwork to combat emerging issues that could severely impact the vitality of communities in the basin, such as PFAS and municipal financing challenges, and to support the economic transformation of our region by identifying key opportunities for sustainable development and job creation in our freshwater blue economy and through municipal climate action.