Seven Steps to Repair America’s Crumbling Infrastructure

By following a strategy to gain public support, utilities can successfully win the rate or tax increases they need.

Welcome to Shoal Creek
A Georgia water utility keeps residents involved in major construction projects

Quaternotes
• El Paso Corp. takes a business-case approach to environmental liabilities
• Projects with tangible community benefits boost support for storm-water measures
• Proactive utilities find it pays to invest in customer relations

Given a Choice, Customers Will Choose Value
When ratepayers understand and accept the value of water services, utilities will achieve full-cost pricing

The Tucson Turnaround
The city’s water agency regains public confidence with communication and customer engagement

To Repair America’s Crumbling Infrastructure
By Michael Drennan

The news isn’t all negative, however. By following a seven-step strategy to gain public support, utilities can successfully win the rate or tax increases they need.

1. Develop a formal, well-designed survey of your community to understand voters’ hot buttons and issues of interest. By understanding the public’s stated priorities, you’ll have a much better opportunity to frame solutions in ways that respond to those needs and desires.

2. Package the solution in a way that responds to the community’s stated priorities. In one California county, for example, the local utility needed to ask voters for money to solve flooding problems. The agency surveyed residents and found that they weren’t as concerned about flooding as they were with trash disposal and solid waste. Using that information, the utility was able to design a solution that was appealing and responsive to the public. Titled the “Clean, Safe Creeks and Natural Flood Protection” measure, it was approved by 67 percent of voters.

3. Create a bipartisan community advisory committee at the beginning of the study process to represent the many local interests who may speak out—for or against—an proposed tax. Ask this group to serve as an oversight committee for technical and cost studies that define the problem and proposed solutions. The committee’s close involvement will lend credibility to funding recommendations. It will also help insulate the agency requesting the funding, as well as elected officials whose support for the tax or bond measure may be needed.

4. Develop a clear, simple, technical study for decision-makers that defines the problem and evaluates the costs and benefits of several alternative solutions. Any time you ask the public to pay for something, it’s wise to spend time look- ing closely at what needs to be done, as well as costs and possible alternatives. Make the study available for public review, and be able to justify the funding request with clear documentation.

5. Educate voters so they understand the problem, the solution, its cost and the cost of similar approaches in other communities nationwide. An informed voter is more likely to support recommendations and requests for funding.

6. Partner with private or nonprofit organizations to design a strong media campaign (local agencies are prohibited from actively campaigning for or against a proposed tax). Media are a key component of any public outreach and education program.

7. Design solutions to accomplish multiple objectives. A creek restoration project, for example, can be integrated into wastewater treatment plant improvements, or stormwater detention basins and groundwater recharge facilities can serve a dual purpose as public parks. These innovative solutions may have added costs, but their additional benefits may be worth the extra expense. They can help you positively present your point of view and capture the attention and participation of elected officials. If you’re not proactive, negative stories can arise out of the blue.

By Michael Drennan

Michael Drennan, P.E., is a Senior Manager of Business Development at Brown and Caldwell.
When Tucson Water’s new $85 million water treatment plant went on line in November 1992, it instantly produced a flood of customer anger. The treated Colorado River water that gushed out of customer taps was foul-smelling and red, and it damaged the plumbing and appliances in many homes.

Tucson Water faced a customer relations crisis. The new plant—and the treated Colorado River water it produced—were supposed to spare Tucson from its overdependence on dwindling supplies of groundwater. Instead of solving the city’s water resource problems, however, the system immediately created new ones.

Instead of shutting down the new system, the utility struggled to reassure furious customers while it tried to find solutions to the problem. Those steps, however, weren’t enough. Tucson Water, a city department, also faced the wrath of the city council; as a result, the next few years were “very ugly,” recalls the utility’s Director of Communication Mitch Basefsky.

Public outrage led to the departure of Tucson Water’s director and much of its upper management. The city council halted the delivery of treated river water, the new treatment plant was largely mothballed and activists were aiming to take city water policy into their own hands.
By 1998, when Tucson Water’s new direc- tor, David Modeer, arrived to take the reins of the department, he saw that its credibility was on the line. “We had to prove our honesty and integ- rity,” he says, “and rebuild the trust of the community. We also had to convince the public that we could provide an acceptable river water product and, just as important, that we could deliver.”

To begin its turnaround, Tucson Water went back to basics, focusing on rebuilding customer relations and communication. Its first step was to publicly apologize to custom- ers for the 1992 river-water debacle. The utility then launched an aggressive public outreach program, called “As the Top,” to actively engage customers throughout the city. Tucson Water began placing newspaper ads asking for public input on water quality. Based on the responses, the utility began making key water quality in- formation directly available to the public on its web site, in the newspaper and through a new telephone hotline.

At the same time, Tucson Water went back to the drawing board, researching how it could create and deliver a product using river water that customers would be willing to accept. Based on customer feedback from several tasting panels, the utility came up with a blended prod- uct that customers liked and could be produced by mining naturally occurring groundwater with river water that was recharged into the ground.

Engineering the new solution, however, wouldn’t be easy or cheap. To produce the blended water, the utility needed to build a major recharge facility outside Tucson. It also needed to replace or rehabilitate more than 200 miles of galvanized steel and cast-iron water mains, the source of many of the previous red- water problems.

Putting a face on the utility

There were also major political obstacles ahead. Activist groups were busy gathering signatures on a petition that if signed would keep the utility from implementing its plan to blend river water with recharged groundwater.

Vote of confidence

Key allies also came on board to advocate for the new Tucson Water water system. Academic, community and business leaders, Modeer says, realized that the blended water solution was important for Tucson’s future, and they stepped up to fight the ballot measure. On Election Day, the utility won a major vote of confidence: 65 percent of voters supported its plan for blending ground- water with recharged river water.

In May 2000, the utility completed the first phase of the recharge system—including an eight-million-gallon reservoir, a booster station, nine wells and more than 24 miles of pipeline—and started sending the newly blended water into the city. Since then, the system has been functioning smoothly, and Tucson’s water table is gradually recovering from decades of over-pumping. The utility has been able to shut down more than 80 groundwater wells, and it’s completing its first expansion of its recharge facilities.

Tucson Water’s River Water is a hit with customers. “We essentially designed, in a very small sense,” Modeer states, “I never saw anything like it.”

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The result, Basefsky adds, has been a “180-degree difference” in morale.

The transition has been very successful, he acknowledges, but very hard. “We put more faith and trust in our people, allowed them to have meaning- ful impact in the process and empowered them to do what they’re skilled to do,” Modeer says.

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A Georgia water utility keeps residents involved in major construction projects
W ith a population of more than 700,000, Gwinnett County, Ga., is one of the fastest growing regions in the country. To make sure the county has a constitute supply of water to keep pace with rising demand, the Gwinnett County Department of Public Utilities (DPU) recently doubled its water treatment capacity, supplementing its single existing plant with a new facility, the Shoal Creek Filter Plant. DPU also added a new intake to draw water from Lake Lanier, the county’s raw water source, and a pumping station to carry it to the Shoal Creek treatment facility.

All of these capital improvement projects were constructed over the past four years in a small section of the county near Lake Lanier, a popular recreation area near metro Atlanta. As a result, the potential for the construction to cause traffic problems and other public impacts was very high.

Crucial communication

DPU recognized the need to launch a wide-ranging outreach effort to help build public support for the improvement projects, explains BC’s Terry Cole, who worked with DPU to develop the communication effort. “Since construction activity was concentrated in a small area of the community,” she adds, “public buy-in was crucial.”

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Wealthy property owners in the area most affected by the DPU project teams,” Cole says. “As a result, residents began to see public outreach as essential. It’s the glue that holds projects together.”

Key goals were to dispel rumors, provide opportunities for open dialogue and offer timely and complete information about the project. With construction estimated to take nearly four years, Cole adds, it was also essential to coordinate information between DPU and its contractors to ensure that accurate and consistent messages got out to the public.

Dubbed the Lanier Community Outreach and Liaison project—LANCOOL—the public information and relations program has gone a long way toward building and maintaining community trust and support. “The program has set the standard for all future public involvement efforts,” says former DPU Director Tommy Furr. “I’m not aware of any infrastructure project of this magnitude undertaken in a small area of the community that has received so few complaints.”

Personal connection

Face-to-face contact with residents has been a key aspect of LANCOOL’s success. Signs posted on neighborhood street corners notify residents about local, open-house-style community meetings organized by the DPU to share information and get feedback about the projects. “Inside, we’d have information stations manned by members of the DPU project teams,” Cole says. “As a result, residents began developing personal relationships with DPU team members. All of a sudden, they were dealing with real people with names and faces, not just an impersonal county agency.”

The utility supplemented these face-to-face meetings with newsletters and monthly updates, fact sheets posted on library bulletin boards and a telephone hotline number that speeds DPU response to any issues. LANCOOL, she adds, also trained DPU project team members on communications messages, plans and contacts. As a result, she says, “every manager knows exactly what to do and who to call, in any situation that may arise.”

When dealing with the public, Cole adds, “flexibility and fast response are crucial, and DPU has quickly handled community concerns as they’ve emerged. Neighbors in one community, for example, called DPU complaining of construction noise at a site after working hours, between 7 a.m. and 10 p.m. DPU was certain that its contractor was not working outside of the prescribed hours and quickly called a neighborhood meeting to answer questions and pinpoint the likely source of the noise, which turned out to be a nearby municipal landfill that was operating around the clock.

Another effective tool for customer response, Cole says, has been an interactive web site—www.lancool.com—that offers residents complete, current, one-stop information on every project. The site features messages, plans and contacts. As a result, she says, “every manager knows exactly what to do and who to call, in any situation that may arise.”

LANCOOL’s positive results have overcome traditional concern over the time and resources needed for public involvement. “Instead of a burden,” she says, “they’ve come to see public outreach as essential. It’s the glue that holds all their infrastructure projects together.”

Change in attitude

One of the most important aspects of the program, Cole says, has been the change in attitude of DPU’s construction managers. LANCOOL’s positive results have overcome traditional concern over the time and resources needed for public involvement. “Instead of a burden,” she says, “they’ve come to see public outreach as essential. It’s the glue that holds all their infrastructure projects together.”

For more information, contact Terry Cole at (770) 673-3697 or tcole@brownat.com.
s one of the largest independent natural oil and gas producers in the nation, El Paso Corporation (EP) has nearly 800 sites around the country that require environmental remediation. As a public company, EP is also subject to new accounting rules under federal Sarbanes-Oxley legislation that mandate detailed reporting of environmental liabilities on a quarterly basis.

In response, EP has taken a pioneering, business-case approach to environmental remediation—closely managing financial reporting for each site and creating value for the corporation through cost-effective cleanup strategies that reduce environmental liabilities. Brown and Caldwell is one of five alliance partners that helped EP set up and implement the program. “EP leads the energy industry in applying business management principles to remediation,” says BC’s Tom Marrou. “With this approach, the company’s remediation managers can accurately estimate liabilities, dedicate reserves to cover them and quantity the value they realize quarter by quarter.”

Top-down approach
EP’s approach uses a range of business tools to manage environmental liabilities and create value. They include:

• business plans for each project that regularly update and track costs, progress, risks and opportunities
• lifecycle analysis of each project’s scope, costs, schedule, goals and alternative remedial scenarios, from beginning to end
• performance metrics, focused on remediation end points, that measure and track costs and liabilities reduced.

“We’ve gone from a bottom-up approach based on technical considerations to a top-down approach based on management considerations,” explains Marc Ferrer, EP’s director of Environmental Remediation. “The previous approach was open-ended and led to unpredictable forecasts. The new business approach allows for more consistent results and helps ensure that work conducted makes direct progress toward each project’s final closure.”

For more information, contact Tom Marrou at (713) 646-1136 or tmarru@brwncald.com.

A pioneering agency in Orange County, Calif., is taking a new risk-based approach to asset management

When the Orange County Sanitation District (OCSD) in California took a close look at its asset rehabilitation and replacement (R&R) needs for a disaster remediation project, it decided to take a “just-in-time” approach—avoiding the costly trap of replacing or refurbishing its assets too early or incurring major repair costs by waiting too long.

By adopting a risk-based approach to R&R decisions, Brown and Caldwell helped OCSD analyze the likelihood and potential consequences of each asset’s failure and determine the risk costs to the district in dollar terms. The process, notes Brown and Caldwell Project Manager Pervaiz Anwar, has resulted in significant cost savings for the district through its condition assessment phase.

“OCSD,” he adds, “is perhaps the first major agency in the nation to take a quantifiable and repeatable, risk-based approach to making R&R decisions.” Most utilities, he explains, traditionally make these decisions by preparing condition assessments of assets, then subjectively estimating their “remaining useful life.”

“But there’s never a clearer indicator of how long a pipe, for example, is going to last, even with the most careful condition assessment,” Anwar explains. As a result, utilities can end up replacing assets either too early or too late and spending considerably more money than they should.

Calculated decisions
With a risk-based approach, however, utilities can more accurately calculate the consequences of asset failures in dollar terms—then make smart, cost-efficient decisions about whether or where to deploy R&R funds.

The risk-assessment approach focuses on: failure frequencies for various assets based on likely failure modes, as well as the direct and indirect costs related to each mode

• routine O&M, periodic refurbishment and replacement costs
• remaining asset lives based on economic evaluations—comparing an asset’s replace- ment cost against its cumulative risk and O&M costs.

Brown and Caldwell has developed a unique model called RULES (Remaining Useful Life Estimation System) that performs this economic analysis.

Avoiding assessments
In some cases, Anwar notes, risk analysis can show that the cost of asset failure is less than the cost of performing a basic condition assessment. OCSD, in fact, was able to save considerable effort and money by avoiding condition assessments that it had already budgeted.

“This systematic, risk-based approach to making capital investment decisions is an excellent example of the strides OCSD is making in balancing the district’s social, environmental and economic objectives,” states OCSD Project Manager Pam Koester. “It has already saved us money by eliminating unnecessary condition assessments.”

For more information, contact Pervaiz Anwar at (714) 699-4312 or pana@brwncald.com.
The competition for ratepayers’ attention has never been more fierce. Recognizing that it’s not just what you have to say, but how you say it, we think Portland’s Department of Environmental Services is one agency that tops the charts.

Promoting Portland

High-impact media get messages across for Portland, Oregon’s, Bureau of Environmental Services (ES), the agency that treats Portland’s wastewater; provides stormwater drainage services; and works to restore native vegetation, improve the quality of water in rivers and streams, and reduce stormwater pollution in Portland watersheds.

Communication is crucial for these wide-ranging missions, and ES educates and informs residents with well-designed, high-quality materials. Through its three communication programs—Public Information, Community Relations/Public Involvement and Environmental Education—ES uses a bold, multimedia approach to engage residents, teachers and schoolchildren in the city’s environmental efforts.

“We want to educate both young people and adults about the work we do at ES and the impact of that work on public health, water quality and the environment,” says the agency’s Communication Manager, Joan Saroka. “Here in Portland, we put a lot of emphasis on promotion, public education and outreach.”
Situated on the central California coast near Santa Barbara, the picturesque town of Carpinteria relies on local groundwater and nearby Lake Cachuma for much of its water. In the early 1990s, however, the lake nearly dried up from a persistent drought that withered much of California.

Since then, the Carpinteria Valley Water District (CVWD) has had to supplement locally produced water with contracted supplies from the California Aqueduct. These reliable supplies, however, have created heavy fixed costs for the small, publicly owned district. In addition, residential growth has added substantial new potable water quality requirements and costs for the historically agricultural district.

To fund reservoir cover, as well as debt service on its new pipelines, CVWD needed to raise rates significantly for its urban customers.

Strong opposition

But when the district announced the new rates, residents reacted with sticker shock. In letters, phone calls and packed district meetings, some in the community expressed strong opposition to the fee boosts. Residential households in mobile home parks were especially affected by the increase, even though they were connected to multifamily water meters and had no direct relationship to management facilities.

To build voter support for new stormwater management improvements, Santa Monica is proposing a voter-friendly strategy—designing solutions that achieve multiple objectives, with tangible community benefits. Stormwater retention and remediation basins, for example, will serve as parks, and runoff management facilities will be integrated with popular creek restoration projects.

These innovative measures, Drennan notes, not only make sense to voters but can also attract multiple funding partners—including city departments, neighboring cities, and regional, state and federal agencies. BC is helping Santa Monica analyze the feasibility and cost of up to 30 of these multipurpose projects throughout the city.

“By designing projects with tangible community benefits that directly respond to local public opinion polls,” Drennan says, “we’re confident that the city’s voters and ratepayers will approve the funding for these improvements.”

For more information, contact Michael Drennan at (213) 394-4321 or mdrennan@brownandcaldwell.com.

To build voter support for new stormwater management improvements, Santa Monica is designing solutions that achieve multiple objectives with tangible community benefits, such as a potential urban creek restoration project through an existing parking lot (below). The same area circa 1927 (left).
Facing the Financial Future

Planning for funding, capital and operating needs keeps utilities ahead of the game.

To keep up with growing demands for service, the St. Johns County Utilities Department in northeast Florida faced significant infrastructure expansion, upgrade and renewal and replacement costs.

"To successfully fund nearly $100 million in capital needs, we needed a responsible, viable financial strategy," says St. Johns Director of Utilities Bill Young. So before it went to the county board for funding, the utility put together a financial plan that identified its short- and long-term objectives, needs and sources of funding.

"The plan put the utility ahead of the game," says BC's Mike Rocca, who helped develop the financial plan. The county board adopted it and approved the first phase of the $75 million infrastructure program. Wall Street rating agencies gave the utility favorable underwriting ratings of "A2" and "A+," the utility is now moving into the second phase of its expansion, and it's even considering user rate reductions.

Financial and political package

"Utilities generally do a decent job of short-term planning, but most fail to identify or maximize the many different resources available for long-term debt capacity. That's a crucial part of a financial and political package," says Rocca, who has spent nearly three decades helping utilities successfully address their financial, capital, and operating needs.

Brown and Caldwell, he adds, can help utilities review and analyze their asset, operations and financial management, as well as community standards, and develop a realistic plan to meet their financial needs.

For more information, contact Mike Rocca at (407) 691-9256 or mrocca@brwncald.com.

Given a Choice, Customers Will Choose Value

When ratepayers understand and accept the value of water services, utilities will achieve full-cost pricing.

Whoa! Had rates for water-utility services only kept pace with the stock prices of water-related companies, my column this issue would likely be on an entirely different topic. An April 15 article in The Wall Street Journal notes that water-industry stocks rose 24 percent last year, far outpacing the S&P 500’s 11 percent gain for the same period. What’s more, over the past five years, water-related stocks surged 133 percent, compared with an overall loss of 17 percent for the S&P.

What are investors seeing that ratepayers aren’t?

On the supply-side, a growing population’s thirst for a scarce resource reeks of opportunity. And potentially every community in North America must confront the Herculean task of renewing and/or replacing its aging water-related infrastructure. Sharp investors see a market with huge upside that involves waterfalls and suttals, and just about everything between. Perhaps what investors see is...value.

And what do ratepayers see? Well, not as much as one would hope. North Americans have lived through unparal-leled economic and technological growth, yet few stand in awe of the infrastructure with which clean water flows from their faucets or consider what unseen wonders occur once their toilets flush. For as long as many might just triple in the next three to five years.

That survey mentioned above was conducted for Malcom Pirnie in 2004 and involved 71 water/wastewater leaders from 21 states. Nearly 90 percent said ratepayers should pay for their local water utilities’ financial needs. Asked how that could be achieved, 98 percent believed more emphasis was needed on communicating the value of water to the public, customers, regulators and local elected and appointed officials.

Value of water

In his article "The Value of Water" in the April Journal AWWA, Bob Raucher contrasts: "As a ‘silent utility’, water agencies have become invisible and the services they provide are often taken for granted. Because customers and governing officials do not often think systematically about the value of water or water-related services, they tend to focus on the more immediate, visible cost. It is up to the water utility professional to better understand water’s value and to effectively communicate that value to the public."

With this issue of Quarterly we set out to demonstrate how clients are achieving the value connection with customers at many different levels, and how Brown and Caldwell is helping. Progressive utilities are making the value proposition clearer, which is not just turning on the P.R. machine, but building relationships with customers that offer real choice. Innovator Dave Modere (see page 2) of Tucson Water showed his customers value by drawing them into the cost vs. quality decisions of their drinking water. Gwinnett County (page 6) created an army of project advocates by committing to a communications strategy that treated customers in affected neighborhoods like partners.

As recorded in this issue, ratepayers, like investors, will respond to compelling choice in their water and wastewater services. Presenting choices and making the connection on value of service will have ratepayers and investors seeing the same thing-value. And with value comes full-cost pricing.
Media Training Services

Be prepared for your media closeup! Brown and Caldwell offers expert media training, conducted by veteran television and newspaper reporters who specialize in utility communications.

We help water resources agencies craft and deliver compelling and credible messages to the media. Our trainers understand the high standards to which public utilities are held and teach staff to effectively communicate with customers through the media.

Through lively, interactive sessions, we train people to:

- Anticipate reporters’ questions and respond effectively
- Use appearance and non-verbal cues to build credibility
- “Stay on message” and make sure your points are heard

Whether it’s training key staff to talk with the media, or teaching front line employees to recognize media inquiries and smoothly direct them to the right spokespeople, we tailor each session to fit your needs.

Improve your agency’s media savvy. Contact Terry Cole at (770) 673-3697 or tcole@brwnclald.com