Mayor
Ald. Bohl
Ald. Pratt
Ald. Nardelli

Public Works

Inside the Guts of Milwaukee

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Inside the Guts of Milwaukee Fixing the infrastructure is a political issue that could cause ulcers

Infrastructure may sound like an intimidating word to many, but it's a down-to-earth subject: the structural underpinnings of day-to-day urban life, including streets, bridges, water service, sidewalks, alleys and street lighting.

Maintaining a high-quality infrastructure is something few people think about or discuss. And that's unfortunate, since it's "one of the most pressing issues facing the city," says **Ald. James Bohl**.

But questions are now being raised on how well the city is keeping up its foundation. Bohl, for example, stressed the issue in his campaign last spring. Unsuccessful mayoral candidate George Watts charged in his race that **Mayor John Norquist** let the city's infrastructure decline during his 12-plus years on the job.

"Anything that's unseen, he let slide," Watts charges. "I think people in city government are disturbed, and eager to talk about it."

One of those people is John Lindquist, an operating engineer in the city's Department of Public Works. When he began working for the city in 1974, "we were really into infrastructure in this town," Lindquist recalls. "Don't get me wrong-it's still good, better than most towns, but we're getting to the point where it's going to be more expensive to fix things we should have been doing."

Common Council President Marvin Pratt sounds a similar note. Historically, "infrastructure replacement and repair has been one of the city's strongest points," he says. "It's still good, but not as good as it used to be."

Since so much of this bedrock of city survival remains unnoticed, efforts to determine its condition usually aren't that easy. But when a declining infrastructure hits a low enough point, it can become a hot political topic. In late-1970s Pittsburgh, for instance, Mayor Pete Flaherty made a commitment to cut taxes by any means necessary, which translated into street deterioration that eventually earned him the nickname "Pothole Pete."

Mayor John Norquist has touted his cutting the property tax rate by small amounts for the past 12 years. To achieve that, tinkering with how the

city went about repairing and maintaining its roads and bridges was a major factor. That has led to some public works professionals suggesting that "Pothole Pete" has showed up in the Milwaukee mayor's office.

David Kuemmel, the city's public works commissioner from 1983 to 1988, caveats his comments on the city's infrastructure by saying he hasn't been involved since Norquist pushed him out. That said, "I see deterioration above ground, I see traffic signal repairs not being made, street lighting cables not being laid."

If street repairs aren't done in a timely fashion, they become more torn up and cost more to fix in the long run.

Kuemmel uses a mathematical formula to assess how well the city treats its streets. The city is responsible for maintaining 1,293 miles of streets (which excludes expressways, state and county highways, park roads and harbor access roads). The estimated useful life of roads varies among types of pavements, "25-35 years for asphalt, concrete is 40-50," Kuemmel says, adding that the life of particular streets "obviously depends on traffic."

For most of the 1980s, the city was replacing or resurfacing about 25 miles of streets per year. Dividing that figure into the total number of streets results in an estimate that every street would eventually be replaced or resurfaced once every 50 years or so. Kuemmel calls that his "replacement cycle."

By the late 1980s, Kuemmel says, "we were proud we had finally gotten the replacement cycle down to 35." But since then, he maintains, the city is "not investing enough money in streets."

According to the Department of Public Works' 1999 annual report, 16.8 miles of street were paved last year. That figure results in a replacement cycle above 75 years, "and no pavements last 75 years," Kuemmel asserts. In 1998, the DPW reported that just under 12 miles of streets were paved. A dozen years ago, "we weren't at where we wanted to be, and now we've slowed it down," Kuemmel notes.

Today's DPW has a different measuring stick, with a system based on expenditures rather than on the amount of work done.

"It's usually best to look at dollars spent," contends current DPW chief Mariano Schifalacqua. "Just looking at miles [paved] doesn't give you a full picture."

Schifalacqua's view is that "repaving a mile of a small residential street is

a lot less costly than a mile of a major arterial street," while resurfacing projects are less costly than a complete reconstruction. For example, he asserts that normally "on a concrete residential street, you're going to last 60-70-80 years before you have to resurface. If you look at some of our residential side streets, we have concrete streets that are 50 years old and look great."

Kuemmel responds that "they may try to stretch them out that long," but he warns that the eventual rehabilitation will be much costlier as a result. "You can find the occasional [long-lasting] residential street, but I can show you 40-year-old residential streets that need resurfacing right now."

Bohl's Northwest Side district was developed after World War II, and he is clearly concerned about its condition no matter whose maintenance plan is being used.

"These roads were put in 40 or 50 years ago," he says. "We've clearly had a Band-Aid approach."

Schifalacqua says the city's current pavement management system rates the condition of every block of every street, based on its age, type of pavement and traffic volume. He adds that the system, now required by federal regulations, is the basis for the city's total street improvement budget.

"You'll see our dollars [invested] have steadily been going up," Schifalacqua says. "We've been real vigilant in making sure we budget paving money at an appropriate level."

The city's six-year Capital Improvements Plan anticipates paving about 19.5 miles per year annually through 2005. Using Kuemmel's formula, this gives a replacement cycle above 66.

Kuemmel and former City Comptroller James McCann don't like the current system. Without data on miles paved and replacement cycles, "you can put $2 million into capital improvements but you have nothing to compare it to" as to whether the investment is sufficient, McCann asserts. (The six-year plan actually calls for city expenditures averaging just under $8.5 million per year, exclusive of funds raised through individual assessments and state and federal aid.)

Both Kuemmel and McCann criticize Norquist for eliminating the city's Capital Improvements Committee, a three-member board that issued annual reports tracking infrastructure spending and priorities over a six-year period, with annual revisions. The committee in some form dates back to 1941.

"I don't know if that served the city well in the long run," says **Ald. Tom Nardelli.**

"Even more important was abolishing infrastructure condition reporting, done as part of the committee's annual report," Kuemmel complains. He says the committee's report gave an understandable assessment of the big picture by comparing the pace of work on street, bridge, water and other improvements with estimated useful life.

"You could figure out in a few sentences how the city was doing," Kuemmel says. "Over 10 years, it tells you whether you're taking care of your infrastructure or living off past investments." Now, he contends, "nobody knows the condition."

Kuemmel finds less to criticize in bridge upkeep, with one big exception. "They're in good shape on bridges," he remarks, noting that during the 1970s and 1980s, the Wisconsin Avenue and 16th, 27th and 35th Street viaduct projects were completed.

The exception was the 6th Street viaduct.

Lindquist agrees. "The 6th Street viaduct was supposed to come down. [Outgoing Mayor Henry] Maier had it in the budget. It was the first thing Norquist took out of the budget."

Kuemmel confirmed Lindquist's account. Instead, the present viaduct has remained through years of wrangling over design and delays in accumulating state and federal aid. The new viaduct will open in mid-2002, but Lindquist charges that the delay "put the lives of people in jeopardy" and means the viaduct will cost much more.

But Kuemmel understands the difficulty of lining up financing for major bridges, pointing to the State Street bridge downtown. "It was one of the worst bridges in the city in 1990, and it hasn't gotten any better," he says of a bridge that once was stuck open for more than six hours last year. But because it's also designated as U.S. Highway 18, the city is again waiting for federal and state money to help pay for a major rehabilitation.

Several people interviewed said a 1988 change in state law that established cabinet-style government has had a detrimental effect. Until then, the Public Works commissioner was appointed by the mayor but had a fixed term and could only be removed for cause.

Maier "had a lot of faults, but in six years he never told me how to run the department," Kuemmel says, adding that Maier even allowed him to appeal mayoral budget decisions and seek more funds from the council's Finance Committee. Now the Public Works commissioner serves at the

mayor's pleasure, and Kuemmel contends "that means no one can tell the truth without risking their job."

"That first budget of his was draconian," Lindquist says of Norquist. Nardelli remembers that the new mayor chopped $15 million in capital improvement spending.

McCann charges that infrastructure became a lower priority after Norquist became mayor.

"The most important thing in the world was to cut back the tax rate by a few cents," McCann recalls. "If you cut back [on infrastructure], nobody would notice," especially since attempts to rein in police department spending drew strong opposition.

By contrast, McCann says Maier, with whom he sometimes feuded, "kept capital improvements going every year, even if it was a hardship." If officials wanted to cut back on planned infrastructure spending, "you'd better have a good reason."

Pratt says a DPW reorganization a few years back further centralized power by creating a unified DPW budget. Previously, the heads of several divisions within the department had their own budgets.

"It's harder to get a straight answer" on divisions' needs, Pratt says. "There's less oversight by anyone outside of the [mayor's] administration. There were more checks and balances before.

"It's harder to determine if, in fact, infrastructure improvements are being made on a timely enough basis. The work that is done is taking longer to do. You have fewer people doing more work," he says.

Pratt estimates that more than 200 DPW positions have been eliminated in the past four years.

"The mayor was intending to keep government costs in check," Nardelli says, adding that he agreed with that objective but that eventually, "we cut too damn far. You could not buy a loaf of bread in 2000 for what you paid in 1988."

Sewer workers means less work getting done. Even taking for granted something as basic as street sweeping can lead to problems far worse than just a few extra leaves in the gutters.

Lindquist calculates that 2,350 miles of street sweeping was not done this year due to lack of manpower. "That means more runoff into sewers," he

says.

Schifalacqua responds flatly: "I don't believe we've been sweeping less."

Pratt says that as for sweeping, "now the onus is on the aldermen or constituents to request it." Pratt adds that he has noticed leaf removal taking longer to complete in recent years.

Nardelli says delivery of many city services is "complaint driven" now.

"You don't have to go far to find street lights that are burned out," the Northwest Side alderman says. "We don't have the crews that used to go and replace them. Even when citizens call them in, they aren't always replaced in a timely manner."

Lindquist also asserts that DPW employees clean catchbasins less frequently, again due to reduced staffing. Catchbasins send water runoff into sewers, and he warns that clogged catchbasins can mean a greater likelihood of flooding and sewer backups.

Schifalacqua admits that the frequency of catchbasin cleaning was reduced in the 1990s, "but that lasted only one year. We're back to the previous level."

Nardelli disagrees. "I don't think they clean catchbasins at all. We still see debris around most catchbasins in my district."

As for DPW staffing levels, "certainly we have seen a reduction in the total number of positions," Schifalacqua confirms. "We have seen a lot of efficiencies in terms of computerization and organizational efficiencies." But he maintains that "when you look at people actually performing field operations, that's pretty much the same."

All three aldermen interviewed warn that a change in the financing procedure for residential streets may mean fewer repairs in the near future. The portion of repair costs paid by assessments of individual property owners will increase, and they fear this will make property owners more reluctant to approve street repairs.

"I think that's going to cause people to postpone even longer work that should be done," Nardelli predicts. "Delaying would only cause the cost to rise."

If this happens, Bohl adds, "we're spiraling down a very dangerous course."

The city's six-year Capital Improvement Plan says that "although the aggregate level of funding has not increased over time, Milwaukee's infrastructure systems have been not only adequately maintained but in fact have even expanded over the last decade. The city's policymakers have remained committed to adequately funding Milwaukee's infrastructure needs."

We'll eventually learn the accuracy of that conclusion in the long run, but as the economist John Maynard Keynes once quipped, "the long run is a misleading guide to current affairs. In the long run, we are all dead."

In the short run, say the next 15-20 years, if the city's assertion is right, Milwaukeeans will be able to continue using streets, bridges, water service and the like without much thought.

If the assertion isn't right, it could be expensive. If widespread large-scale street repairs become needed, for example, Kuemmel warns that "it's four times as costly to wait to improve pavement at the end of its life than to do it at the right time."

And individual decision-makers can pay a price, too. Just ask "Pothole Pete" Flaherty, who ran for governor of Pennsylvania touting his tax-cutting as mayor. Flaherty's opponent routed him with a negative television spot centered on a bumpy ride over Pittsburgh's pothole-strewn streets.

The Workings of Water

Water service is a big part of infrastructure, and the city's water system is stepping up its replacement efforts to keep mains from bursting and residences from going dry. According to the city's Capital Improvements Plan, "the oldest active water mains in the city were originally installed in 1872. The estimated useful life for the majority of the water mains currently in existence is 110 years." However, more than 70% of the system is less than 75 years old.

The Milwaukee Water Works reports 1,949 miles of water mains in service, and between 1992 and 1998 an annual average of less than 11 miles per year were replaced. That's a replacement cycle of nearly 200 years.

Water Works Superintendent Carrie M. Lewis says that after she took over the department three years ago, she concluded that "we're a little higher than we'd like to be" in that regard. "The objective to which we aspire is to replace all water mains within a 100-year cycle," she says. "We are going to increase the number we replace each year until we reach that."

Since the Water Works is financed by customers, Lewis has an easier job funding projects than other city officials who have had to compete for tax dollars while Mayor John Norquist focused relentlessly on holding down property tax rates.

In replacing water mains, Lewis says, "we're not necessarily starting with the oldest one. Some of those 1895 mains are unbelievably good." From a total of seven miles replaced in 1999, the number increased to nine miles this year.

"We're hoping for 11 next year," she adds, and up to 14 or 15 miles replaced in a few years, aided by a 1999 water rate increase. -Bill Kurtz