

BWL removes Lansing's last lead water service line

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City-owned utility says it has replaced 13,500 to 14,000 lead water service lines since 2004. With BWL's help, Flint makes progress with its lead removal plan.



(Photo: Julia Nagy / Lansing State Journal)

LANSING -- With a backhoe and much fanfare, the city's last lead water service line was removed Wednesday.

Mayor Virg Bernero and Board of Water and Light General Manager Dick Peffley celebrated the service line removal at noon near a home east of downtown. They stood at a podium with David Price, BWL's Board of Commissioners chair, with a banner that read "We got the lead out" as their backdrop. Attached to the backhoe's bucket was a GoPro camera that captured footage of the machine as it yanked the line out of the ground.

"Just because it's out of sight doesn't mean it should be out of mind," Bernero said of the city's urgency to remove lead lines over the past 12 years.

Lead water service lines received attention this year because of an ongoing crisis in Flint that involves lead-contaminated water. In Lansing, the BWL has replaced 13,500 to 14,000 lead service lines with copper lines since 2004. Of those lines, 12,150 were deemed active by BWL and replaced at a cost of \$44.5 million. Money to replace BWL's lead lines with copper ones comes from a fund for capital improvements ([/story/news/local/michigan/flint-water-crisis/2016/09/27/flint-detroit-water-crisis-lead/91176828/](http://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/news/local/michigan/flint-water-crisis/2016/09/27/flint-detroit-water-crisis-lead/91176828/)) that's main source is revenue from ratepayers. The utility has over 55,000 water customers.

Lansing's last lead service line was replaced at 619 Barnard St., just off South Larch Street, between Michigan Avenue and Interstate 496. The utility confirmed that none of its water provided to customers has detectable lead when it leaves its two water conditioning plants. It also confirmed there are no lead mains in its 800-mile distribution system.

"This is a tremendous accomplishment that shows communities across Michigan and the nation that replacing lead service lines can be successful with planning, operational expertise and the support of the community and the customers," Peffley said of Wednesday's service line removal.

Lansing BWL takes next step to help Flint water crisis

[\(http://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/news/local/bwl/2016/02/17/lansing-digs-in-for-flint-help/80444724/\)](http://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/news/local/bwl/2016/02/17/lansing-digs-in-for-flint-help/80444724/)

During the BWL's search for lead service lines, it found that 2,695 service lines were not lead. There were also 79 inactive lead service lines found and 31 lines deemed inactive of an unknown type. Those lines were also removed and cut at properties' curb box. The BWL is unique compared to other utilities across the country because it owns service lines from the curb of a street to the meter.

All of the 110 lines were found at vacant or abandoned properties and are expected to be replaced with copper lines -- if the properties become occupied. The disconnected inactive lead and unknown service lines are not included in BWL's 12,150 lines that have been replaced since 2004.

Bernero said Lansing joins Madison, Wis. as the only two water utilities in the nation that have removed all lead service lines. The City of Madison's website confirms it was "the first major city" to launch a lead service replacement program. Madison's program started in 2001 and aimed to remove replace 8,000 lines with copper lines. The website says the program has "largely been completed." (<https://www.cityofmadison.com/water/water-quality/water-quality-testing/lead-copper-in-water>)

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Lansing Mayor Virg Bernero, BWL General Manager Dick Peffley, right, and BWL Board of Commissioners chair David Price celebrated Wednesday removal of the city's last lead water service line. (Photo: Julia Nagy / Lansing State Journal)

Bernero put pressure on BWL to make infrastructure improvements and remove lead lines when he was a state senator. At the time, Jennifer Granholm was governor and Bernero created [a safe drinking water task force](http://flintwaterstudy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Lansing-debate-Virg-final.pdf) (<http://flintwaterstudy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Lansing-debate-Virg-final.pdf>). He also chaired the task force and appointed its members.

Bernero said Wednesday he thought, as a senator, that removal of Lansing's lead service lines would take at least 10 years. He said officials and residents in other communities need to pay attention to their water delivery systems and be proactive, especially due to Flint's ongoing water crisis.

"We take for granted that when we turn on the water good stuff comes out," Bernero said. "When we flush the toilet, bad stuff goes away. We rely on that and we have for years with confidence."

Lansing BWL's push to remove lead water lines continues

[\(http://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/news/local/2016/01/22/lead-water-line-removal/79108766/\)](http://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/news/local/2016/01/22/lead-water-line-removal/79108766/)

Peffley said BWL crews have learned over 12 years how to remove lead service lines more efficiently. A line can be removed in about four hours at a cost of about \$3,600. When the work first started, the cost per line was about \$9,000, he said.

Lead service lines that existed in Lansing before their complete removal didn't pose a hazard to customers, according to BWL officials. Steve Serkaian, a BWL spokesman, told the LSJ in January that water that passes through service lines – lead or copper – is tested "multiple times daily, seven days a week, 365 days a year."

The utility will continue to use a phosphate anti-corrosion compound to coat water pipes and prevent leaching of lead and copper into drinking water. Lead may still exist in properties' plumbing fixtures, but its the owners' responsibility to replace them.

Lansing experience helps Flint

Flint is underway with a lead service line removal program called Fast Start that's being overseen by retired Brigadier Gen. Michael McDaniel, an East Lansing resident. McDaniel said Wednesday that BWL's expertise and advice in removing lead service lines has helped Flint stay on pace to remove about 6,000 lines by the end of 2017.

"They had the foresight to say 'We're not going to wait for an emergency, we're going to start doing that now,'" McDaniel said of Lansing's approach.

McDaniel said three Flint area contractors, including one following BWL's removal methods, have removed about 50 lines a week in the city since October. McDaniel added that 615 lead service lines have been removed and replaced with copper ones from "most of October and all of November."

Unlike BWL, the city of Flint is only responsible for removal or replacement of service lines from the water main to the curb stop valve – not to the meter. But Flint is now removing lead service lines and replacing them with copper lines from the curb to the water meter of each property. The work done at each property requires an owner's permission. McDaniel said it's still unclear how many lead service lines are in Flint because some are paved over and others are hard to find due to a lack of records.

Flint's water crisis started when the city, under a state-appointed emergency manager, began using water from the Flint River without needed corrosion control. Doctors soon noticed a spike in lead levels among Flint children. The state helped Flint switch to another water source, but health concerns remain. Slow improvements to the water system have prompted Flint residents to still use water filters in their homes.

It is expected to take about a year before Flint switches to an improved, multi-million dollar system that will provide safer Lake Huron water.

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