

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 27, 2021

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden
President of the United States
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden:

We are encouraged by your commitment to rebuilding our nation's crumbling physical infrastructure in an equitable and resilient manner, made evident by the \$2 trillion American Jobs Plan you have proposed. We are writing today to request your partnership and the inclusion of robust federal funding for wastewater infrastructure in the Build Back Better agenda to address capital improvements to our nation's failing sewage systems.

In New York State, the ongoing sewage crises in the Bronx and Westchester County highlight the need for federal funding to support sewage infrastructure upgrades, which have profound health, equity, and environmental consequences. The City of Mount Vernon has experienced divestment in public infrastructure that goes back at least three generations. As a result, there are sewage backups and leaks in residents' homes, neighborhoods, and in nearby waterways. These sewage issues expose residents to dangerous toxins and pathogens which, according to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, can have severe health implications.¹ Mount Vernon has the highest concentration of Black residents out of any city in New York state, and these residents are being disproportionately impacted by the lack of attention and prioritization of this issue.^{2,3} Exposure to raw sewage and other pathogens could pose lasting health conditions and can have devastating economic repercussions that could impact families for generations. Furthermore, both the federal delegation and the Mayor are acutely aware and very sensitive to the sewage runoff that is contaminating the nearby Hutchinson and Bronx rivers, posing immediate regional environmental, health, and economic crises among communities along the waterways that include northern portions of New York City. We must push for a response that will speak to sewage contamination in the homes and businesses in Mount Vernon, as well as the surrounding waterways.

¹ Environmental Protection Agency. "Sanitary Sewer Overflow (SSO) Frequent Questions: What Health Risks do SSOs present?"

<https://www.epa.gov/npdes/sanitary-sewer-overflow-ssso-frequent-questions#health>

² U.S. Census Bureau. "American Community Survey, 2014-18."

³ In addition, the City of Mount Vernon is known to have the highest concentration of Black residents north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

The federal government has played an important role in monitoring and regulating the sewage infrastructure crisis in Mount Vernon. In September of 2020, the Environmental Protection Agency issued a permanent injunction to remedy discharges of raw sewage into the Hutchinson and Bronx Rivers, citing this as a violation of the Clean Water Act. Under this injunction, the City of Mount Vernon is required to perform necessary construction and repairs; obtain necessary equipment and staffing to comply with the Clean Water Act; and develop updated evaluations and plans. However, limited federal funding means that the burden of maintaining and fixing water infrastructure falls on municipalities who cannot afford the repairs. Fixing the sewage issues will cost millions of dollars, and the city lacks these funds. While the City of Mount Vernon has invested funds to begin remediating these issues and sought external funding from New York State, as a financially disadvantaged community, the city is limited in what actions they are able to take to address the environmental crises their residents experience from infrastructure failures. As a government committed to not only regulating environmental issues but also to ameliorating them, it is essential that we support localities in crisis with the resources necessary to address wastewater infrastructure emergencies.

The wastewater infrastructure crisis in Mount Vernon is similar to issues in other parts of the region. In the City of Yonkers, delayed upgrades over the past decade to a local wastewater treatment plant have harmed working class communities and polluted waterways that serve the Bronx, Westchester, and surrounding region. Issues with odor insulation at this plant impact the health and wellbeing of nearby communities. While the city and Westchester County have worked together to prioritize this issue, more robust federal funding is needed to fully remedy the problem. Furthermore, New York City's sewage system is over 150 years old, and approximately 20 billion gallons of sewage and runoff make it into the waterways surrounding New York City every year.⁴ While localities and New York State have invested funds to begin addressing these issues, the lack of robust federal investments limit what action local governments can take to address these environmental crises.

This issue is not unique to the New York region, further underscoring the urgency of robust investments in wastewater infrastructure. According to a 2021 analysis from the American Society of Civil Engineers, wastewater networks across America are in desperate need of repair, receiving a D+ grade overall.⁵ The majority of the nation's sewage pipes were built forty-plus years ago and are reaching the end of their life cycle, resulting in an estimated capital investment gap of \$81 billion. Nationwide, sewage infrastructure issues disproportionately harm economically disadvantaged communities and communities of color. Given your strong commitment to environmental justice, enshrined through the Justice40 Initiative, we believe this racial and environmental equity issue should be a top priority for your administration.

⁴ Chaisson, S. (2017). "When it rains it pours raw sewage into New York City's waterways." National Research Defense Council (NRDC). <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/when-it-rains-it-pours-raw-sewage-new-york-citys-waterways>

⁵ American Society of Civil Engineers (2021). "Wastewater: 2021 Infrastructure Report Card." <https://infrastructurereportcard.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Wastewater-2021.pdf>

With this in mind, we request that the Build Back Better Agenda include increased funding opportunities and resources for sewer system repairs and replacements for socially and economically disadvantaged communities. We are pleased to see wastewater infrastructure included in your proposed plan, and urge the administration to further scale up this aspect of the American Jobs Plan and to emphasize the importance of robust funding streams for states and municipalities to address this issue. In addition to dedicated infrastructure funding needed to remedy this environmental equity issue at the national scale, we encourage you to consider how improvements to technical assistance efforts can better support disadvantaged municipalities apply for and access future federal resources to ensure the equitable dissemination of funding. We look forward to working with you and your administration on this important issue facing our constituents and communities across our nation.

Sincerely,



Jamaal Bowman, Ed.D.
Member of Congress



Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator



Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator

Cc:

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