COMMENTARY

Drinking water is underground crisis



Faimon Roberts

The news was pretty easy to miss, but earlier this month, a couple hundred residents in tiny Madison Parish were told by the state not to use their water. Not to even touch it.

The water had been contaminated by the herbicide paraquat, used in farming.

Madison Parish, in the state's northeastern corner, is a heavily agricultural parish. A farmer was filling a tank with paraquat when low pressure in the area's water system allowed the chemical to backflow into the system, according to the Louisiana Department of Health.

Residents were warned and told not to drink the water or use it to brush teeth, bathe or wash clothes or dishes. Ingesting large amounts of paraquat can lead to a number of illnesses and eventually organ failure.

The order was lifted several days later.

Stanley Ogden is a police juror in Madison Parish. When I asked if he'd gotten any complaints from residents about the problem, he laughed.

"Our water's so damn bad here anyway," he said.

This time, the particular affected water system was actually one of the parish's better ones.

Then there's the Tallulah water system, which serves the greatest number of parish residents; it's been designated as failing by the Louisiana Department of Health.

"It's so nasty," Ogden said of the water in Tallulah. Earlier this year, residents complained about dirt and debris in the water flowing from their taps. The city needs a new water treatment plant but can't afford to pay for one without state or federal help.

Plenty of Louisiana residents can relate. Water systems around the state are grappling with the same set of problems.

Aging infrastructure and dwindling revenue are driving hundreds of these systems into situations they aren't going to be able to fix.

It's time to call this what it is: Louisiana's drinking water crisis.

There are more than 1,000 public water systems scattered across the state. Many of them were built a half-century ago or more. Now, their wells, pumps, towers and pipes are aging and failing. Things here haven't gotten to the level or received the attention of Flint, Michigan, or Jackson, Mississippi, yet. But it seems just like a matter of time.



STAFF FILE PHOTO BY JAVIER GALLEGOS

Konnor Kosa checks inside the hatch of a large tank carrying potable water at Killian's water well near Town Hall on May 1.

In May, a well problem in Killian forced Livingston Parish to spend $30,000 per day trucking in water and supplies for the tiny town's residents. Residents in lower Plaquemines were unable to use the tap water for weeks last year after a saltwater wedge moved up the Mississippi River and fouled drinking water supplies.

It's not just the small rural systems, either. Residents in Orleans and Jefferson have also dealt with problems.

In Shreveport, the system needs massive repairs. Voters there already approved an $80 million bond to upgrade water towers and the plant, but fixing all the outdated pipes in the ground would cost closer to $500 million, an official told me. That's money the city doesn't have.

Even affluent areas struggle to keep clean water flowing. One Slidell resident who recently had to boil her water again described it as a "mess." She and her family don't drink water from the tap anymore; they buy bottled water instead.

Some of this is not new. Officials in smaller parishes and in dusty state offices have been sounding the alarm for years. Two years ago, the state began issuing grades to water systems that serve residents around the state. Low grades — like the F that Tallulah earned this year — don't always equate to dirty water, but they may indicate that the water system is not financially sustainable for the long term.

The options are few. For smaller systems, the best hope is often to consolidate with a bigger provider. But what bigger provider wants to take on a failing water system?

For others, including larger systems, the answer is to raise taxes or usage fees, something that is not popular and can put a hardship on poorer residents. When higher rates kicked in for Jefferson Parish residents last year, a move parish leaders sold as a way to bring needed upgrades to the system, the parish had to hire additional call-takers to handle the complaints.

Many systems' customers simply can't afford to pay the fees that would be necessary to bring their systems up to snuff. In Killian, a system that took in $115,000 in revenue in 2022, officials have said it would cost $4.5 million to put in a new well.

The state has designated some federal funds to help smaller water systems, and that helps.

But it's a small fix for a big problem. Without major solutions, Louisiana's underground crisis will eventually seep into every one of our lives.

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Harris' housing plan won't work



Megan McArdle

The worst parts of Vice President Kamala Harris's economic plan are pretty bad. Like, so bad that her more credible defenders are reduced to arguing that silly proposals such as exempting tips from income tax at least poll well, and maybe when she says "first-ever federal ban on price-gouging on food," she really just means "robust anti-trust enforcement."

In any case, supporters say, her best ideas are very good, especially her housing agenda. America's housing crisis makes everything else about the U.S. economy worse: It exacerbates homelessness, slows family formation, prevents workers from moving to opportunity and puts an enormous strain on the budgets of hardworking people. Harris's promise to build 3 million homes by the end of her first term is a signal that she understands what it takes to fix the problem and is serious about doing so.

It's certainly true that America's housing problems can't be fixed without new supply. Unfortunately, it's unlikely that 3 million homes, or anything close to that number, could be added in the next four years. Meanwhile, the other, not as good, parts of her housing agenda will be both easier to achieve and, absent the new housing supply, counterproductive.

Harris's housing plan has three main planks. One of these is $25,000 in down payment assistance for first-time home buyers, which she says will help more than 4 million home buyers over four years. Another is a plan to punish corporate landlords who buy up lots of single-family rental properties or use algorithmic software to set prices.

The third plank is the 3 million new homes, which Harris promises to get built with a combination of initiatives: a $40 billion "innovation fund"; "a historic expansion of the existing tax incentive for businesses that build rental housing that is affordable"; a new tax credit for building starter homes; and a red-tape initiative that is meant to streamline permitting processes for builders.

Without the millions of new houses, the two other initiatives risk making the housing situation worse. Restrictions on corporate landlords could shrink supply by undermining the build-to-rent market, which is currently one of the strongest sectors in new construction, according to developer Bobby Fijan. And that down payment assistance for first-time home buyers would likely end up in the pockets of existing homeowners, as newbies use it to bid up prices in a tight market.

It's not impossible to construct 750,000 extra homes a year — housing starts, which were about 1.2 million last year, hit 2.2 million at the peak of the housing bubble. But ramping up production to that level would take years, and might never happen, because the only real way to get there is via the one promise Harris will find hardest to keep — that is, to make it much easier for builders to build.

Although the subsidies for affordable housing might help on the margin, the more targeted they are to low-cost housing for people with modest incomes, the more red tape will be required to ensure they hit those targets and the less housing they'll help build. For example, one major source of affordable rental housing is the low-income housing tax credit, which has been around nearly 40 years, and has built a total of 3.6 million units in that time. It would be hard for tax credits to produce even one-third of that number, again, in just four years.

Her new tax credit for starter homes will likely have similarly modest effects — both because it would take time to pass legislation and write regulations defining what exactly counts as a "starter home," and because the more the regulations are tightly targeted to very cheap homes, the fewer homes she will build overall.

Perhaps such volume would be possible if government could speed things up and lower costs by streamlining red tape. But that is harder than it sounds, politically and practically.

Most regulatory barriers to building are state and local, not federal, and any attempt to override them must pass strict constitutional review, which could tie them up in court for years.

At every step Harris will be faced with angry interest groups looking to gum up the works with lawsuits and pressure campaigns. Her reward, if she persists, would be that at some point in the distant future, some extra houses would be built, a fact for which she'll get little credit. In contrast, bashing corporate landlords and handing out checks will produce big headlines and grateful voters right now.

So, if her policies are to be gauged by their political payoff, this one probably won't measure up. Instead of a good housing plan marred by a few bad additions, the counterproductive stuff might be all we get.

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GOP's greatest skill is taking credit for things Democrats did



Catherine Rampell

Republican vice-presidential nominee JD Vance has accused his Democratic counterpart of "stolen valor," a term that typically refers to lying about a military service record.

But the actual perpetrators of "stolen valor" in this election are Vance and his party — if not in the military context, then at least in the public service one. Republican politicians have repeatedly claimed credit for valiant actions they didn't take, pro-family legislation they didn't support and other popular policies they're trying to repeal.

For instance, as Democrats celebrated the Inflation Reduction Act's two-year anniversary, Republicans, who unanimously voted against the law in 2022, condemned it and pledged to claw it back. (They've already voted a couple dozen times to repeal various portions of it.)

But when it comes to the *projects* the law subsidized, these same Republicans are big cheerleaders — both for the projects and their own (imagined) role in enabling them.

Most major IRA-funded projects are in Republican-held districts, so the list of triumphs to seize responsibility for is extensive. House Majority Leader Steve Scalise (La.) has puffed up wind energy investments in his state. Rep. Nancy Mace (S.C.) has likewise trumpeted an electric vehicle plant and an electric regional transit hub. Rep. Andy Biggs (Ariz.) touted a high-tech battery manufacturing facility. And Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (Ga.), who has called global warming "healthy," has since cheered a solar manufacturing project in her district.

This is hardly the only initiative Republican lawmakers have bogarted credit for despite their efforts to stop it. Last fall, House Speaker Mike Johnson (La.) cheered the expansion of Florida's Sarasota airport, which he toured with Rep. Vern Buchanan (R-Fla.). That project received at least $16 million from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. While some Republicans supported this law, both men voted against it.

Similar examples abound for Republicans who voted against the Chips and Science Act.

Vance was not yet in the Senate when any of these blockbuster bills were enacted. When he ran for office, though, he bashed the infrastructure law as "a total disaster for our country." He has since appeared to take credit for its funding for the Great Lakes as one of his top "accomplishments" in the Senate. More recently, Vance spent the past month defending his "childless cat ladies" remarks by explaining he simply meant Republicans are more devoted to family-friendly policies than Democrats are. Which family-friendly policies should Republicans be so proud of, you ask? Oh, you know: the ones championed and passed by Democrats.

For instance, Vance often says he's been fighting to expand the child tax credit. But earlier this month, when the Senate voted on a bill to do that, Vance couldn't be bothered to show up. His Republican colleagues blocked the bill from advancing.

Similarly, in 2021, not a single Republican voted for President Joe Biden's temporary expansion of the tax credit, which cut child poverty in half.

The other effort Vance has been citing as emblematic of his "pro-family" agenda: legislation to eliminate surprise, out-of-network medical bills.

"We got these ridiculous surprise medical billings from the hospital because we had chosen an out of network provider, of course, at this most stressful of all imaginable moments," he recounted on ABC's Face the Nation last week, when talking about the birth of his second child. "I've actually introduced legislation to stop moms and dads from having to go through those surprise medical billings." He made similar claims about this legislation on CNN and CBS.

When I first heard these comments, I assumed he was referring to the No Surprises Act, a statute that limited surprise bills from out-of-network providers at otherwise in-network medical settings. Then I realized this (bipartisan) bill was signed into law in 2020, two years before Vance was elected to the Senate.

To be fair, Vance has not stolen all the undue credit for himself. He's also praised Trump for things Trump didn't do. For instance, Vance credited Trump for a recent prisoner swap that, ahem, President Joe Biden negotiated. And Trump himself is of course the master of laying claim to other presidents' valorous and public-spirited achievements.

You know what they say: Impersonation is the highest form of flattery.

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