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## **Cities and Counties are Asking for Help in the Water and Sewer Battle**

Jefferson County Commissioners will go to market next month to sell approximately \$260 million of sewer revenue capital improvement warrants, the latest in a series of transactions over the past four years to help pay for fixing the County's aging sewer system. A lot of the work is refurbishing existing sewer lines, some of which are 75 to 100 years old. The negotiated sale is scheduled for the second week of March.

Local government and water agencies recently released a study that warns of a significant increase in water and sewer bills. The cost to consumers, on average, will double unless there is a large federal investment in new pipes and modern treatment plants.

Deteriorating pipes and new environmental regulations have become so expensive that the Cities and Counties are asking the federal government for help. The water and sewer bills have been averaging yearly increases 6% above inflation.

The league of cities and 28 other organizations are urging Congress to put up \$57 billion over the next five years to help localities meet environmental requirements, replace old pipes and upgrade their plants.

A lobbyist on behalf of the Association of Metropolitan Sewerage Agencies advise that the local governments and individual ratepayers currently bear about 90 percent of the cost of providing running wastewater systems.

State and local governments and ratepayers need about \$23 billion more to keep up with the nation's water and sewer needs, which are estimated to cost \$1 trillion over the next 20 years, say private and government studies.

"Financing the full \$23 billion a year need with utility rate increases would result in a doubling of rates, on average, across the nation," the report says. "If this were to happen, at least a third of the population of the U.S. would face economic hardship."

Experts predict an acute need for repairs and replacement of water and sewer facilities because many of the nation's wastewater treatment plants were built at roughly the same time - in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Those plants connect to underground pipes whose average life spans are ending or as in many areas of Jefferson County, to cast iron or brick pipes laid about 100 years ago and nearing the end of their useful lives.

Congress has begun to recognize the looming problem, but so far there have been few moves in the direction sought the numerous interest groups working together as the Water Infrastructure Network.

*Associated Press contributed to this article*