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State's Business Lobby Blocking Efforts to Remove Lead from Water

By Curt Witynski, Assistant Director, League of Wisconsin Municipalities

The business group, Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce (WMC), agrees lead is dangerous to human health and lead water pipes serving family homes in municipalities across the state should be replaced. WMC wants to make certain, however, that its members don't pay one penny more on their water bills toward the cost of removing lead pipes. That is why they are trying to kill legislation allowing municipalities and their water utilities to create financial assistance programs to help home owners replace lead service pipes.

Lead is found on both the public and private sides of water service lines in at least 120 municipalities statewide. According to the EPA, there are approximately 176,000 lead service lines connecting homes to water mains throughout Wisconsin.

Water utilities have found that replacing only the public side of lead service lines causes lead levels to increase in the homes being served. That is why both the EPA and DNR strongly advise that private service lines containing lead be replaced at the same time water utilities replace the public side of a lead service pipe. Total replacement is the most efficient and cost effective way for municipal water utilities, private property owners, and contractors to completely remove lead from the service lines. Accomplishing full replacement is challenging, however, because it requires homeowners' cooperation.

Many homeowners with lead water services have limited income and find it difficult to afford the cost of replacing their side.

The Wisconsin Public Service Commission (PSC) has ruled that municipal water utilities are prohibited from using utility revenue to assist private property owners with the cost of lead service line replacement.

Legislation under consideration in the Capitol, Senate Bill 48 and Assembly Bill 78, would make it clear that a municipal water utility may establish a financial assistance program to help homeowners replace their lead service lines. Such a program could offer loans, grants or rebates to property owners.

Fifty-two legislators from both parties have signed onto the bill. The PSC supports the bill as do all of the state's water utility groups and my association, the League of Wisconsin Municipalities. At a recent public hearing on the bill, WMC was the only organization speaking in opposition.

WMC argues, primarily to direct attention away from its embarrassing opposition to the bill, that municipalities already have plenty of money available for aiding property owners. The apparent

source for this extra money is the “payment in lieu of taxes” (PILOT) that many water utilities make annually to their municipality. But in an era of strict property tax levy limits and cuts to shared revenue and other state aids, no municipality can afford such a program without reducing other services.

Municipalities are working with legislators to pass legislation allowing water utilities to create innovative ways to help homeowners finance the cost of lead water line replacement. WMC is standing in the way of those efforts. WMC is willing to risk a Flint, Michigan type occurrence in Wisconsin to ensure against the possibility that its members might experience a slight increase in their water bills. Shameful.