

Committee on Science, Space, & Technology
Subcommittee on Investigations & Oversight
Addressing the Lead Crisis through Innovation & Technology
TESTIMONY OF MAYOR MICHAEL J. VENEZIA, BLOOMFIELD

Good Morning Chairwoman. I would like to welcome you, my colleagues from Nutley and Belleville and other distinguished guests here this morning. I would also like to thank all the witnesses and look forward to hearing your testimonies. My name is Michael Venezia and I am the Mayor of the Township of Bloomfield. As everyone in this room knows, over the past couple of years, The City of Newark, Townships of Bloomfield, Belleville and Nutley have experienced high concentrations of lead in the water to varying degrees. Moreover, this issue is not limited to this part of New Jersey but, in fact, is a growing problem throughout our State and the United States. Chairwoman Sherrill has given me the opportunity to address what the Township of Bloomfield has done to remediate this critical issue. We appreciate this opportunity.

To begin, my town gets its water from a shared system with the City of Newark. We are termed a Consecutive Water System. We purchase all our water from the Newark water system. We do not have facilities to treat or manage the quality of the water we receive from Newark's system. However, since 2017, we have been testing the quality of water as it comes into Bloomfield.

In the fall of 2017, the Township learned it had a lead exceedance beyond that which is acceptable under Federal Environmental Protection Agency regulations. While the exceedance level was barely over the federal limit, it still existed and prompted the Township to take action to resolve the matter as best as possible. In November 2017, we held a public hearing to inform our residents of the issue and how to protect themselves from potential lead contamination. As that time, we embarked on a program to discover those locations in town where lead existed in the pipes. What was clear at that time--and remains to this day—is we did not find lead exceedance levels in the Township's water mains.

We learned that the nature of the water we receive from the City of Newark had components that produced a corrosive reaction in lead water lines. Bloomfield Water Department distributed educational material on lead to each one of our water customers. The notice also described the potential serious health effects associated with lead, as well as the sources of lead in drinking water. Bloomfield enumerated the steps that each resident can take to reduce their exposure to lead in drinking water. Bloomfield informed customers via the education materials that homes with known lead service lines should use extra precaution when flushing their water lines. We instructed these customers with known lead lines or high lead test results to flush their water for up to five (5) minutes, by running cold water from their tap if water had gone unused for more than six hours. Users without known lead lines were advised to

flush their systems for sixty (60) seconds before use since their home could still contain internal pipes or fixtures with lead-containing materials.

Further, we started working with the City of Newark to address the issues of water quality.

In August of 2018, our second round of testing indicated we still had homes in the Township whose water exceeded acceptable lead levels. We again held a public hearing to advise our residents, along with sending the mandatory written notification to every household and business within the Township. Additionally, we started providing free PUR water filters, in an effort to assist our residents who believed that lead was in their water. Thus far, Bloomfield has distributed nearly 3,000 PUR filters to residents—and we continue to this day.

We also started an in-house Township program of replacing lead service lines that we discovered in areas where formal testing showed lead exceedances over 15 parts per billion. At the same time, we applied for a low interest loan from the New Jersey Infrastructure Bank in the amount of \$1.1 million dollars to fund more repairs where we found lead service lines. To date, I am happy to report we have repaired nearly 60 service lines using mostly Township staff. We have also retained a contractor to replace an additional 60 lines over the next 2 months.

Since November 2017, we have provided self-testing kits to any resident who wanted their water tested. Since that time, we have submitted over 600 tests, most of them coming back with no indication of lead. Any test that comes back in exceedance of 15 parts per billion for lead, we have or will investigate and schedule replacement of discovered lead lines.

It is important to note that the only way to be sure there are lead lines is to dig the service connection to the property and physically examine the line itself. Clearly, this cannot be done easily or quickly, plus, it requires staff or contractors to perform.

In August, while the City of Newark, Belleville and Bloomfield were making these repairs and providing information to our residents, there was a test of the PUR water filters used by Newark residents that indicated the filters were not working. Frankly, this created a panic. On August 19, 2019, we held our 3rd public hearing on this matter. In the previous 2 public hearings, although advertised the same way, we had no more than 20 people attend those hearings. This hearing had over 150 people in attendance--all very upset and concerned about the water quality. Clearly, the panic generated by the EPA's demand to distribute bottled water in Newark brought greater attention and a lot of confusion to Bloomfield residents.

Bloomfield has taken many steps to improve our water quality. Over the past 4 years, we have invested \$10 million in improvements to our system. We have eliminated dead-end lines,

started a systematic water flushing and valve exercising program. We are in the second phase of our major water relining program; an investment of \$1 million.

Furthermore, we are in the final design phase of two major improvements to our system: First, we are investing nearly 2 and a half million dollars to change water our supply from Newark's water treatment plant at the Pequannock Reservoir to North Jersey Water District's system at the Wanaque Reservoir. We believe this will help our water quality and provide a redundancy of supply.

Second, we have started a \$6 million water meter replacement program. The timing on this is significant. During installation of the meter, the contractor will inspect the exposed water lines for any lead including lead solder. As mentioned before, locating lead in homes is very difficult and many residents do not know if they have lead lines. This will help us and our residents know if that type of piping is present.

For Bloomfield, and I imagine all municipalities who are facing this problem, the need for assistance is extensive. To be sure, financial assistance is the critical matter. We have spent over \$500,000 in the last 2 years on additional testing fees, line replacement, distribution of filters, and every form of public information possible—none of which was planned or anticipated. When I think of the money that our residents will have to pay—let alone the anxiety of not knowing—I believe there needs to be some form of assistance from our federal government. We will literally spend millions in Bloomfield alone. We need help!

Further, the time that it takes to make these repairs—or even investigate lines—is too long. We need both the Federal and State Governments to assist us with the procurement of additional help from qualified contractors. As I mentioned before, we secured \$1.1 million to replace our lead lines. That process took months to secure funding. Our people want repairs now, not to be told they have to wait 8 to 12 months. We need help!

As I said before, Bloomfield is a consecutive water system; we purchase all our water fully-treated from Newark. While we continue to work with our neighbors to resolve this matter, we hope that the Federal and State governments will continue to aggressively assist the City of Newark in fully complying with EPA Clean Water Regulations. We need your assistance now. We are talking about millions, actually I would estimate BILLIONS, of dollars in order to protect our residents.

In the meantime, Bloomfield has, and will continue to do, everything we can, within our limits as a consecutive system customer, to protect and advise our customers.

Chairwoman Sherrill, thank you for this time and opportunity.

Michael J. Venezia,
Mayor
Bloomfield Township
October 15, 2019