

Window of Opportunity for Infrastructure Priorities Push:

By Nathan E. Vassar

As we approach Texas Water this spring, policymakers at various levels appear primed to learn and respond to the types of water/wastewater infrastructure needs to which WEAT members and advocates can testify. With the Texas Legislature in session and the U.S. Congress potentially on a path toward an omnibus infrastructure effort, the time is right to press for appropriate policy changes that impact both the funding of infrastructure and related policy goals that impact POTWs across Texas and the nation at large.

Crafting the right message is critical in order to convey the on-the-ground challenges and realities that face communities and their ratepayers. WEAT and its partners at the state and federal level offer opportunities to engage with legislators in a productive and meaningful dialogue. What is often most important, however, are the testimonies of those on the front line of utility day-to-day operations. A message that resonates often is one that identifies a challenge, as well as potential solutions. Sometimes those challenges relate to existing interpretation of policy, enforcement concerns, and sometimes they are directly tied to the purse strings – What funding sources would be of assistance in pursuing ongoing compliance? What revenue streams have been helpful in the past but may not have been prioritized in ongoing budget cycles? Although there are typically common threads in such utility stories/accounts, each experience is unique, and the background of a particular difficulty or obstacle can speak volumes to the underlying policy goals that the wastewater utility community is pushing.

With a heightened focus on infrastructure in the political discourse, there is a window of opportunity to make a push for a collaborative effort to improve wastewater infrastructure. A significant part of that effort starts at the home front, by highlighting and advertising innovative ways in which Texas utilities are already leading the way in wastewater innovation. A dialogue

that begins by highlighting proactive examples can lead to how additional investment can further joint goals of compliance and high water quality – goals shared by both regulators and the regulated community. As we gather in Houston in April, we will learn of many accounts highlighting how Texans are leaders in wastewater infrastructure. As WEAT members, we can take advantage of increased attention on infrastructure by emphasizing such progress and communicating water/wastewater needs to receptive lawmakers. The time is right to engage, and we look forward to ongoing involvement with critical legislative and regulatory stakeholders.

Nathan Vassar is a Principal at Lloyd Gosselink Rochelle & Townsend, P.C. in Austin, Texas. Mr. Vassar assists communities and utilities with environmental permitting and enforcement matters with both state and federal regulators, with a focus on water quality-related enforcement. His involvement includes negotiating settlement terms and counseling clients with respect to compliance strategies.