



# Cities struggle to fix aging infrastructure

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By Brendan McDermid, Reuters

Workers wearing Hazmat suits clean up the site of a steam pipe explosion in New York. Workers cleaned asbestos-tainted debris from an explosion from a steam pipe that rocked Manhattan, on Wednesday, as some New Yorkers questioned official reassurances that the air was safe to breathe.

**NEW YORK** — An exploding steam pipe under a busy street in Midtown Manhattan this week dramatizes potentially dangerous decay in aging public works systems across the nation that will require tens of billions of dollars to fix.

From New York to Atlanta, cities officials are raising utility rates, issuing bonds and trying to modernize public works systems that are straining under the demand of ever-increasing populations. The USA is likely to add about 100 million more people by 2040.

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The American Society of Civil Engineers estimates that \$1.6 trillion is needed over a five-year period to modernize the nation's water systems, dams, runways, roads and bridges but that only about \$1 trillion is being invested.

Atlanta is spending \$3.9 billion on an overhaul of drinking water and wastewater systems that will stretch into 2014. The city has raised water and sewer rates an average of 10% a year, making them some of the nation's highest.

"What we're doing in Atlanta right now is going to be replicated around the country," says Janet Ward, spokeswoman for Atlanta's Department of Watershed Management. "We're really teetering on the brink. The older cities are going to feel the effect first and the funding is just not there."

The U.S. Conference of Mayors' Urban Water Council says preliminary results of a 330-city survey to be released this year show that more than half reported up to 50 water main breaks annually. Many cities don't have the money to upgrade their systems and are getting little federal help, says Leslie Wollack, principal legislative counsel for the National League of Cities.

In New York, Wednesday's early evening blast from a steam pipe installed in 1924 hurled steam and debris hundreds of feet in the air and sent thousands of rush-hour commuters fleeing in a scene reminiscent of the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. One woman died of an apparent heart attack, and about 30 people were injured. The rupture

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came a year after a power outage plunged parts of Queens into darkness for more than a week, a failure officials have blamed in part on the city's aging electrical grid system.

By 2030, when New York City is likely to add roughly 1 million more residents, nearly all of its public works systems, from its water network to power grids, will be a century old. To meet the coming demand, Mayor Michael Bloomberg has unveiled 127 initiatives that would modernize and expand the networks and make them safer for the environment.

"The steam pipe explosion should serve as another wake-up call for everyone that we have to address this issue of aging infrastructure now," says New York Deputy Mayor Dan Doctoroff. "These long-term investments are not politically popular. Somebody's got to pay for them. But what's clear, and we experienced this dramatically yesterday, is unless you make those investments now, you pay so much more in the future in terms of money, in terms of inconvenience, and tragically sometimes in terms of loss of life."

The pipe was part of a system that winds for more than 100 miles beneath the city, carrying steam to heat and cool its many high-rises. It's not clear how many cities use steam systems, which date to the 19th century. Steam pipes are more common in older cities, on university campuses and in manufacturing plants.

*El Nasser reported from McLean, Va. Contributing: Marisol Bello in McLean; the Associated Press*

