

August 4, 2022  
Tom Neltner  
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Zoom interview with Jamie Ramsay

Links:

[120 Water Audit](#)

[GIS - Esri](#)

[EPA Guidance](#)

**Takeaways:**

Communication - LPRL plans have to be done well and safely for many reasons, but also because negative messaging dissuades other communities from initiating a replacement plan because communities get frightened of further contamination

Training - Contractors and Plumbers in the private sector need to be trained and educated on how they can also benefit from being part of the LPRL programs

Replacement is inevitable - state governments and eventually federal will soon mandate replacement, so getting it taken care of should be priority. Messaging.

Incentivizing community buy in: should be easy but is not. Pain point: incentivizing land lords to get on board with replacement. Messaging should be : buying a home with lead pipes is taboo

Inventory: Vital. "If everything is unknown, we can't make progress". "Mapping is very important."

Asset Management Plan is needed

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**Jamie:**

Can you talk to me about what you think the key issues are in lead pipe replacement and where the roadblocks are to lower-resourced towns accessing BIL funding for it?

**Tom:**

There's two parallel tracks. One is getting into compliance with the lead and copper rule and anticipating a tighter lead and copper rule in the future. And there's getting the money to solve this specific problem as well as all of its other infrastructure problems. Those two in my mind go lockstep together.

There's a lot of small utilities that are still in denial - they just don't think that I need to deal with this until the lead and copper rule forces us to. And the lead and copper rule from the last administration doesn't force them.

So the inventory becomes (important). The EPA is getting the guidance out today. Yesterday, I got the heads up on it. So that'll make a difference. It'll force them to do it. The challenge with that inventory is a note. So if you've bought or rented a home that was built before 1978, you probably got at the end, a form that you filled out that you've said yes to without reading and said, No, I don't know whether there's lead paint here or not, or lead based paint hazards. Because everything is unknown when it comes to lead paint, even though it shouldn't be. Progress has been really hard. And don't want that to happen on pipes.

So this inventory, we have to have enough information. So people get started. So if everything is unknown, then we can't make progress. So we need to create this with visual tools and enough incentives to fill in the gaps. And so, the challenge is, what is known and what is unknown, what is lead and not let thinking of unknowns is everything in between. How confident do we have to be that something is lead or not lead to be able to move forward? Some states and we're going to fight it as Pennsylvania, where they said unless you see the lead and check it, almost the whole strip, we're not going to treat it as lead. So everything gets done no, or vice versa for the nonlinear. Michigan took a more sophisticated approach and said you need to do statistical sampling. the state did that. It's much smarter that you need to take a random sample and use predictive tools so it's lead, not lead, or it's likely metal or not like and we need to have gradations of unknown for us to be able to make progress. There's a group called Blue Conduit that's working on predictive models and I think their predictive model is pretty good, especially since they keep fixing it as we learn more. It's a learning model, and it's public. So the key is, we can't put everything into the unknown bin. Or if we're gonna do it, we have to categorize it otherwise we will fail. There will be no incentives.

Communities think the first step is to do an inventory. It's an important step. But for many communities, they don't know where most of these pipes are. If it's a small town, it's in the city center. It's an oldest buildings, right? It's not in the suburbs. You can get it's the old 80/20 rule, right? You can know where 80% of your problem is just because of experience and knowledge of your system. So while they're doing inventory, while they're pursuing funding, which we'll get to, they also have to be starting the process.

They have to learn how to do this, how to replace the pipes. They think the plan is you write the plan, you do the inventory, and then you get started. Never gonna make any of these goals. So they have to get started. In my mind, for the smaller communities, they're going to do one of two ways. They're just going to hire a contractor who's going to come in and rip the pipes out and

just get it done. So like Benton Harbor, MI did and screwed it all up. And we can't have the message go out that this is that they're making it worse, that they're tearing up people's yard, that they're increasing levels because they're not doing the flushing right. So one of my pieces and that's one of our priorities is how do we get contractors up to speed so they're able to provide the services. We don't want every small utility training people and frankly, most of them will want their people to ever go inside of a house. So we need to have contractors IE, plumbers, us whatever. We need to have the private sector geared up and it's through an apprenticeship, in my mind, geared up and trained. So we need to have a case for worker training. We need to have supervisory training, in my pitch on supervisory training is they need to go to the cities. You need to have them go to the cities to watch how it's being done in Cincinnati and newer. How's it being done right.

**Jamie:**

Is the process of replacing the pipe on the public side, something that most city construction workers would have the knowledge and tools to do?

**Tom:**

Hardly, there's not enough of them for the small ones (towns). Partly because There's a tradition in small towns of hiring it out because you can't ramp up and down for projects. So anything that involves the (water) main they usually hired out a big firm like American Water which has lots of small ones. You know, they're conglomeration ones they bought, they tend to have crews that do it. But even then, they stay on the public side. So the expertise is often there.

And on the private side it's not necessarily there. This is important because the workers at Cincinnati got elevated blood levels, because they were handling the pipe and we're not being careful. So we actually have NIOSH, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, did a study and gave recommendations on how to keep those levels down. So we actually know the answer, right? It's just a matter of how do you do it right and make sure that people get trained, so we don't have awful stories that will provide bad light on the work that's done by utilities, by the investments here. Imagine how that could get ugly.

We want to figure out how to get the right get people trained and do that right. Making sure there's crews that are able to do this job right and working with similar needs to try to move that forward. It's getting complicated. One of the questions we are working with unions. The United Associates is the big Union on the side. And they're trying to figure out how do we get access to the infrastructure money. We talk to them through the Blue Green Alliance, which is environmental groups and Unionists groups working together.

**Jamie:**

Would unions be applying through their States for the funds?

**Tom:**

So they want to figure out how to have the union contractors be the most competitive, right? So in the contractor world, and I am, this is not my expertise. There are contractors that don't want

to do because of that, I think it's I can't remember though. I'm drawing a blank now on the law that says they have to pay basically wages, prevailing wages. You know, that helps all workers, whether they are union or not. I think part of the goal is to make sure that the contractors that use union have an apprenticeship program that builds the industry and they are the ones that get this money. And I'm guessing that that's an administration priorities in the way the messaging okay. So it's been in the workforce that does it. It's engaged the plumbers too. I think that's a great way. The Plumbers by and large are not unionized.

I think it's only going to happen if we get them (plumbers). I want to get as part of that building the workforce. I want to find a way to get union the I'm sorry, the plumbers, who are generally not unionized to market this to their customers. You know, because every business means I gotta get in the front door. Once they hit the front door, I can sell them new faucets, whatever else I want for it. That's what United States is built on.

If we can make sure that they see that when the water utility gets money from the SRF program, that they're out there pitching that we should work with them. And there, we want to get them on the preferred vendor list. We want to make sure they know how to do it, right. So we can't forget about the plumbers. And from just a great optics, this is about jobs. And you can get plumbers out there doing this work. They're gonna get it done right. We have to get it done right. They're gonna be doing it. They'll build it into their services, right. That's it. So building your workforce, for the water utilities, but also building the workforce for the plumbers.

**Jamie:**

We're also trying to understand an incentive to prioritize LPRL and the incentive for communities. In some of the communities we spoke to citizens have to help identify where lead pipes are, especially in private land. Is that a big piece or is that pretty easy to get people to buy into that and be cooperative?

**Tom:**

It should be but it's not. It's an expense. Okay. It just depends on where people are at so people don't even want to know that. The water comes into their house. They just want to know that it comes out the faucet. Other people like me replumb the house I'm an engineer. So one event is in the center. So if we map that inventory, in Blue Conduit and others are working on national mappings, it's one of our priorities that we do it in a way that it's state or national level. And you can look up and see if your home has it. We create incentives to for homeowners to check. The biggest incentive is when you sell or you're renting a home. Our biggest challenge is to get landlords involved because landlords don't want to do this.

So one of my key audiences is union contractors or contractors in general, but I don't want to forget the plumbers. And then it's also you know, it's the industry that wants to know that if you're going to be selling a home thinking about the selling of a home to make it sort of taboo to buy a home with lead pipes. We don't want to make you scared of the house. That's bad, but we want to make them say before I buy this house, I went out of it. And the advantage of that is it creates pressure on the water utilities to get it workforce make sure they're doing it right. The

water utility under the rules has to replace the portion they own. It's now up and in their priorities. So it means they need to be more proactive. And it creates just sort of the demand and the perception so you move things forward.

Mapping is really important and to make sure that map is out there. So I know Blue Xonduit is doing some exciting stuff with Google about getting that public. And there are an awful lot of utilities. The rule requires that they make online maps if you're one of the 500 cities over serving over 50,000 people.

**Jamie:**

It's expensive to do this in a private home. And if there's you know mandates from the state like Illinois, is mandating that everyone replace the pipe so you're gonna have to do it regardless. How do you see resolving that if during a recession or if folks just do not have the money for replacement?

Tom:

So if it feels like it's inevitable, it's gonna have to happen. People will start planning it, right. So you have to create the sense that this is going to be inevitable that in 10 years. If you're still drinking water in the lead pipe like you will be in Chicago 10 years. You know, you're an exception, and those have to be treated like exceptions. That's the overall message.

Wealthy people are going to do it on their own. They're going to pay for it. The cost of replacing the pipe for \$5000 bucks is small. If it means I can sell the house, too. I don't lose the audience of a young couple might have kids. Right? So by creating the demand right and creating incentives, so wealthy people take care of the issue themselves and our money that makes it easier to go to the disadvantaged communities and we create the demand for the clean water before it is too late.

As long as they can use that money to do partials (partial replacements), that's what's gonna happen. And we need to have EPA very quickly say no partials. So that means the utilities now they got to deal with this. And if I was the money, and I know I want to replace the main just a lot of the money is gonna go to replacing mains that are older mains that are associated with lead pipes. We have got to get that fixed. I've asked them. EPA told me in June that they're going to get that out. But we have to create for the water utilities, not just with the threat of rulemaking that we know is going to come but also I lose access to my SRF money. EPA says it's a policy that isn't how the march memo was written. I think you could read it that way. But if you don't want to read it that way, you're not going to read a lot of water utilities don't want to read

**Jamie:**

Do you think smaller communities actually know that they have access to the BIL money for replacing lead pipes?

**Tom:**

It's not it's not my place to know what they think. EPIC is probably the best one (to ask). **What EPIC told me is that most of them aren't even thinking of this.** They're not going to think of it until there is a rule that says we're going to require it.

**Jamie:**

Do you know if there are any dashboards or software that people use to kind of organize the information for inventory and what lines have been replaced?

**Tom:**

Who is working on one? **120 water audit** is. It's another consulting firm that focuses on this issue. I'm sure other consulting firms are doing it. **The problem is most of these places don't have an asset management plan. And if you don't have an asset management plan, it's pretty hard to manage your assets.**

**Jamie:**

I think there's like a lot of areas to target like, whether it's the inventory or it's the communication side.

**Tom:**

To me it is **the messaging. We have to create the idea that all these pipes they're on the way out. It's a matter of when and are you going to be a laggard, are you going to be an early adopter** to be in the mix? We've already got our early adopters.

**Jamie:**

Some of the messaging that we saw that is a concern is that it's dangerous, and that if people come into your home and replace these lead pipes, you're going to be exposed to lead. So people don't want to do it, that kind of thing. How valid is that?

**Tom:**

You can make a mess. Okay. Not just a Benton Harbor, but you can create some pretty high levels. And right now, the default in the industry, is to just assume that consumers do it right to leave a little flyer and tell them how to do it. **I think the contractor who does the work should come in and do it.** It's not tough. It's a 30 minute task (to check for lead pipes). But it's important that we just got to get that part of the process. That's another message. I have got lots of messages.

It was sort of exciting for me to hear that somebody in the administration is thinking About this - that is good.