

August 2, 2022
Jonathan Flowers
Environmental Engineer - [Robinson Engineering](#)
Illinois
Phone interview with Jamie Ramsay

Links:

[Guide to funding. compliance in IL](#)

LSLR = Lead Service Line Replacement

Takeaways:

- Application process can be daunting for communities who do not have staffing to collect data, signatures, etc for an engineering firm to create a plan or the labor to do the LSLR work
 - Confusion over BIL qualifications and rubric prevents some communities from even attempting to apply (costly, unclear)
 - Inventory and execution require community cooperation
 - Communities need technical assistance
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Jamie:

Can you the flow of how a municipality would apply for funding through you?

Jonathan:

So we would charge the village a fee of like, \$15,000 to put together what's called a project plan. That project plan takes about six months for the state to review. It takes us about two months to do it. Then the last six months to review it, and then you get put on a list once they approve it. So the incentive funding list and then depending on where you sit on that list, you get funded or not, basically. So there's like a series of processes when you gather all the information for this project plan. You submit it, they review it, they give you comments back and they give you preliminary approval, and you have to have what's called a preliminary approval hearing. And then once you do that, you get final approval, then you have to wait till March 31. When the list gets published.

Jamie:

Do you work just in Illinois, or do you work all across the country?

Jonathan:

The vast majority of our work is in Illinois. We do work in Indiana and Wisconsin too.

Jamie:

But is it too different to operate from state to state or is it just more convenient for you guys to work locally?

Jonathan:

It's a little bit different from state to state. So each state has their own timeframe. Administered you know when their state fiscal year starts and ends, things like that. And then you know, who you apply to and who administers the program, all that stuff. The forms are different. It's the same program and same requirements, but it's just implemented differently in different states. I could probably pick it up but it would take me a little bit of time.

Jamie:

With communities that don't have a huge staff can you go through some of the pain points that you think they might have in applying? what would prevent them from even considering doing applications?

Jonathan:

Oh, definitely. It is hard to understand. We've run into a few issues, where we'll go through the whole process and then the community will be disqualified because they can't produce that proper financial documents. That's happened three times now. That's a big issue. Also getting the data that we need, sometimes staff are just too busy, and they're understaffed, and they can't get things that we need on time. We need to get mayors' signatures. We need to pass an ordinance through the board. We need to do things like that as part of this process, and sometimes they're just understaffed, and they don't have the knowledge or people just left or something like that. It just makes things hard to get the information that we're looking for. And that is a reality.

To say not to mention the payment aspect of it. A lot of these communities don't pay us until they get the loans. So there's that aspect too. And you know, not at all engineering firms are gonna jump in feet first. If they know there's an eight month delay on payment.

Jamie:

Can cities use BIL funding to pay for some of these engineering services (project plan)? Or data collection? Can they use those funds for that or is that strictly for the replacement of pipes?

Jonathan:

No, they can use it for the project plan. It is kind of like a reimbursement for them. So, the idea is that they would pay us to put everything together and then a year later when they get the

funding, they would reimburse themselves. But a lot of the communities, they don't have \$15,000. That hurdle is too high for them to get over. So it's on the engineering companies to take that on, and hope that it gets approved. Now the actual legwork of, you know, getting the data, putting together the ordinance, going through all the finances, all that stuff that municipality have to do on their own. They can't reimburse themselves for their own time. They can only pay for the engineer's time. So the time that they spent out of their own pocket.

Jamie:

Is inventorying where pipes are a problem in your experience? What is your experience with that?

Jonathan:

Yeah, that's the biggest problem, especially on the public side. So usually services: there's a public side, the private side divided at the valve where you cannot turn off your water at your it's called the **B box Valve**. So you can go inside the homes to get the private side. You can take pictures via survey, you can do home inspections, but no one really knows what's on the public side, you'd have to dig and nobody wants to pay for that. It's like \$500 per day. That's really the biggest unknown that people are having a hard time finding ways to get around it.

I mean, you could do like water sampling inside the home, but that's complicated. You can do like statistical methods. At Sea, you can figure out where the watermain has been replaced in town based on the hydrant age, so every water hydrant for fire hydrant will have a stamp age on it when it was made. That doesn't want to go in but none of that stuff is foolproof. So yeah, that's definitely a big hurdle to get over. And that's the biggest one is knowing where things are and then of course the cost and getting buy in from the public, to sign an agreement to get it done. To let you in their property, and then throughout the process to cooperate. Say there is a problem where their basement starts leaking. After you do the surface replacement things like that happen. Out of the little nuances to these type of jobs, because you're working in private, private basements, and yards. But by far the hardest thing is finding which pipes are lead and which ones aren't.

Jamie:

Do most cities have the skilled workers to do the replacement if they get the funding. Is the actual work that has to get done mechanically complicated?

Jonathan:

I mean, it's not the most mechanically complicated job. I'd say no. Most communities would not have staff that can do the work the way that it needs to be done. So you need the most trenchless so you would drill underneath the ground with what's called a **horizontal directional drilling machine**. That you drill into the basement from across the street, and then pull back the new pipe and then connect it to the watermain. So most communities can do everything but that. That's kind of the most technically complex part and so is the connection inside the house. You just need a plumber for that. And not a lot of a few communities have, you know, active plumbers that can do stuff like that. I wouldn't expect it from an underserved community.

Jamie:

Are there things that you see in this process that could be easier? If you had a wish list and money and time and resources were not an issue?

Jonathan:

Absolutely. I think if the communities had technical assistance, to process through application, do the legwork for them, you know, get their finances in order and reported, the ordinances passed, get the legal opinions that they need. All of that stuff would go a long way to helping with this, as would some payment of the upfront engineering costs. That would be the two big things to make it a lot easier.

Jamie:

And just to clarify when you say "the ordinance is getting passed," can you elaborate on what that means?

Jonathan:

They need to pass an authorization ordinance. They're basically approving themselves of applying for funding. It's an ordinance so requires a lawyer to look it over. It requires board action. Sometimes it just takes a long time to move through.

Jamie:

Is there anything else that you want to say towards this process or anything else that we should know about?

Jonathan:

Yes. And the other big thing with the bipartisan infrastructure law is nobody knows how much money each community is going to get, or how that money is going to be allocated, like which parts of the community will get the money, which communities will get the money first, which parts of their community need to be done first. There's this whole funding and prioritization issue that's super vague right now.

If this law would have come out with some of those guidelines like in the past (it would have been better. Everybody's trying to figure out what to do. We can't get people to sign up to do it, because they're not sure that they're going to get funding, because it's only 50% funded or is it not? Is it going to low income communities or is it not? There's a lot of confusion with that.

Jamie:

In your experience has there been more transparency as to how the prioritization usually goes for federal funding?

Jonathan:

Yes. There's usually some sort of scoring rubric: if your population is this, if your diversity is this, unemployment that... that you should have scored on this level and you get this much funding.

SRF program has that. But nobody's determined how the infrastructure law money is going to be given and how you're going to fit into that. So it's been a little frustrating.

Yeah, obviously, it needs to be better. If you have any other questions, feel free to reach out, as well.