

Fix pipes first, then WTP4

It's hot out there, and the drought shows no sign of ending. In an ironic twist, water isn't falling from the sky the way we'd like. Instead, it's bubbling up from where it's not supposed to every time a water main breaks and floods a street. And it's getting to be a common occurrence.

Recently, Austin Water Utility admitted that 4 to 7 billion gallons of water are lost every year due to breaks and leaks. That's more than 10 million gallons daily. Remember that next time you hear Ray Benson singing, "Watch your water like it was your son or daughter..." on Austin Water Utility's ubiquitous TV spot.

Ten million gallons a day is a staggering amount of waste. For this reason alone, it is prudent for the Austin City Council to immediately suspend work on Water Treatment Plant 4, and to redouble efforts to repair our failing infrastructure.

Controversy and debate over WTP4 isn't new, but here's why going ahead with WTP4 is misguided.

Suppose you own two older cars that are meticulously maintained and rust-free. Everything from the engines and brakes to the safety equipment and suspension is up to date. But there's a problem. The tires are no good. The rubber is worn. They leak and go flat every day.

So what do you do? Get new tires, right? Wrong. You buy a big car, and load it up with all the options. Even worse, you put the same old worn, blowout-prone tires on it. This is what our city leaders have decided to do.

Austin has two operating water treatment plants: Davis and Ulrich. Both were built decades ago, but are regularly maintained, updated and in fine working condition. They serve our needs well, but Austin's water department admits that 142 miles of pipe are worn down, leaking and breaking. However, the leaks are all over our 3,000-mile system. As many as 100 have happened in a week.

This is completely unacceptable.

Here's another factor. Failure of the pipes is not just due to age. It's our severe weather. Every summer lately is hotter for longer periods of time. If this climate pattern continues, as climatologists warn it will, then our infrastructure will continue to literally crumble beneath — and faster. So it makes no sense to build a shiny new water treatment plant that will only add 50 million gallons of treated water per day when we are wasting 10 million gallons a day right now.

And it could get worse. According to an article in the *New York Times* on Aug. 14, "There have been numerous 30- and 40-year droughts. The worst gripped Texas and Mexico for nearly a half-century, from 1450 to 1489." It is folly to think that droughts of the past could not be droughts of the future — or the present.

There is a bright side. Thanks to conservation measures, the growing population of Austin uses less water per capita every year. Water consumption in Austin during periods of peak demand water has not increased since 2001 — but we could do more to conserve on par with other large cities.

The people of Austin deserve better leadership and vision on this issue. Construction of WTP4 has barely begun. Only 15 percent has been completed. Now is the time to stop and get our priorities straight and repair and replace our leaking infrastructure.

With hundreds of miles of pipe urgently needing to be replaced, halting work on WTP4 makes sense. And as for the impact to the local economy and the loss of jobs at the WTP4 site, there should be little to worry about. With at least 142 miles of pipe needing immediate attention, there's plenty of work to do — and no time to waste.

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