

WHAT DOES THE RECENTLY PASSED INFRASTRUCTURE BILL MEAN FOR NEW YORK AND THE COOP?

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By John B. Thomas

It is challenging to find room for optimism in the current political, social and economic climate as rising inflation, increased political polarization and the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic weigh down national spirits. Yet amidst the chaos, there are some signs of progress that will mean tangible improvements to the lives of New Yorkers and Coop members.

Specifically, the recently passed Infrastructure Bill (known formally as the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act - IIJA) includes \$550 billion dollars in new spending over five years that promises to improve everything from our transportation systems, drinking water and sewers, communications infrastructure to our agricultural system. All of this while also leading to an estimated several hundred thousand new jobs, and via processes that are legally required to remedy historical injustices for low-income, rural, Black, Indigenous and other structurally disadvantaged communities.

THE RECENTLY PASSED INFRASTRUCTURE BILL (KNOWN FORMALLY AS THE INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT AND JOBS ACT - IIJA) INCLUDES \$550 BILLION DOLLARS IN NEW SPENDING OVER FIVE YEARS THAT PROMISES TO IMPROVE EVERYTHING FROM OUR TRANSPORTATION SYSTEMS, DRINKING WATER AND SEWERS, COMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE, TO OUR AGRICULTURAL SYSTEM.

Although by no means sufficient to address some of the broader systemic challenges facing the country—notably climate change—there is room to appreciate some of the positives that should be coming to New York City and State in the next five years, specifically as it relates to transportation, water, communications, agriculture, equity, and jobs. These changes will have material impacts on the lives of Coop members, our city, our region and on the Coop itself.

Transportation



ILLUSTRATION BY ERIK SCHURINK

By far the largest single tranche of the new funding—\$110 billion—is for transportation: roads, bridges, passenger and freight rail, public transportation, airports, ports and waters, traffic safety and electric vehicles. For New York, some of the most notable investments include \$10.7 billion for the Metropolitan Transit Authority alone to support with longstanding issues related to signaling improvements as well as extension of the Second Avenue subway, accessibility upgrades at stations and electrification of the bus fleet. New York is also expected to receive \$2 billion for bridge and tunnel work (including support for another planned tunnel between New York and New Jersey), \$685 million for airports, \$175 million to install new electric vehicle charging stations and \$50 million for street safety efforts and bike lanes. These investments in the region's transportation system are expected to create a more accessible city with increased public transit options, greater bike lines, better air quality (through reduced pollution) and additional green spaces.

Water



ILLUSTRATION BY ERIK SCHURINK

The IIJA's \$55 billion for drinking water, wastewater, water reuse, conveyance and water storage infrastructure represents the largest investment in the nation's water infrastructure ever. Notably, nearly \$24 billion of this funding will provide below market-rate loans and grants to fund water infrastructure improvements—\$2.6 billion of which are allocated to New York alone. These below-market loans and grants will enable many smaller, poorer municipalities to afford water and wastewater infrastructure improvements that they historically haven't been able to support given their lower tax bases.

A key (and long overdue) element of this package is \$15 billion for the Lead Service Lines program to replace lead pipes. New York still has an estimated 360,000 lead pipes delivering water to people's homes statewide—the fourth highest number of any state in the nation, according to the environmental advocacy group the Natural Resources Defense Council. There is no level of lead in drinking water that is safe for human health, and so all of these pipes are in urgent need of being replaced, as was tragically demonstrated with the emergence of and ongoing crisis in Flint, Michigan.

While water is delivered from reservoirs to the City's water mains lead-free, old buildings may still have lead service lines that connect them to the water mains, which can result in drinking water contamination with lead resulting from corrosion. Although all city-owned properties have had these lead service lines replaced, the responsibility for ensuring lead-free drinking water to private residences is on the building owner.

The City does engage in robust monitoring of lead in drinking water, but replacing pipes remains a work in progress to ensure all City residents are lead-free. Residents can request a free drinking water test kit from the city. The City also maintains a database of the lead service lines it is aware of, which shows that the Coop's pipes are not contaminated with lead.

Communications



ILLUSTRATION BY ERIK SCHURINK

The IIJA also includes \$65 billion to ensure that every American has access to reliable, high-speed internet. New York can expect to receive at least \$100 million to provide broadband coverage across the state to help the nearly 200,000 New Yorkers who currently lack it. Importantly, the program also includes funding for something called the Affordable Connectivity Benefit, which will help provide assistance to those who might not be able to afford it—a program for which an estimated 28% of New Yorkers will be eligible.

Agriculture

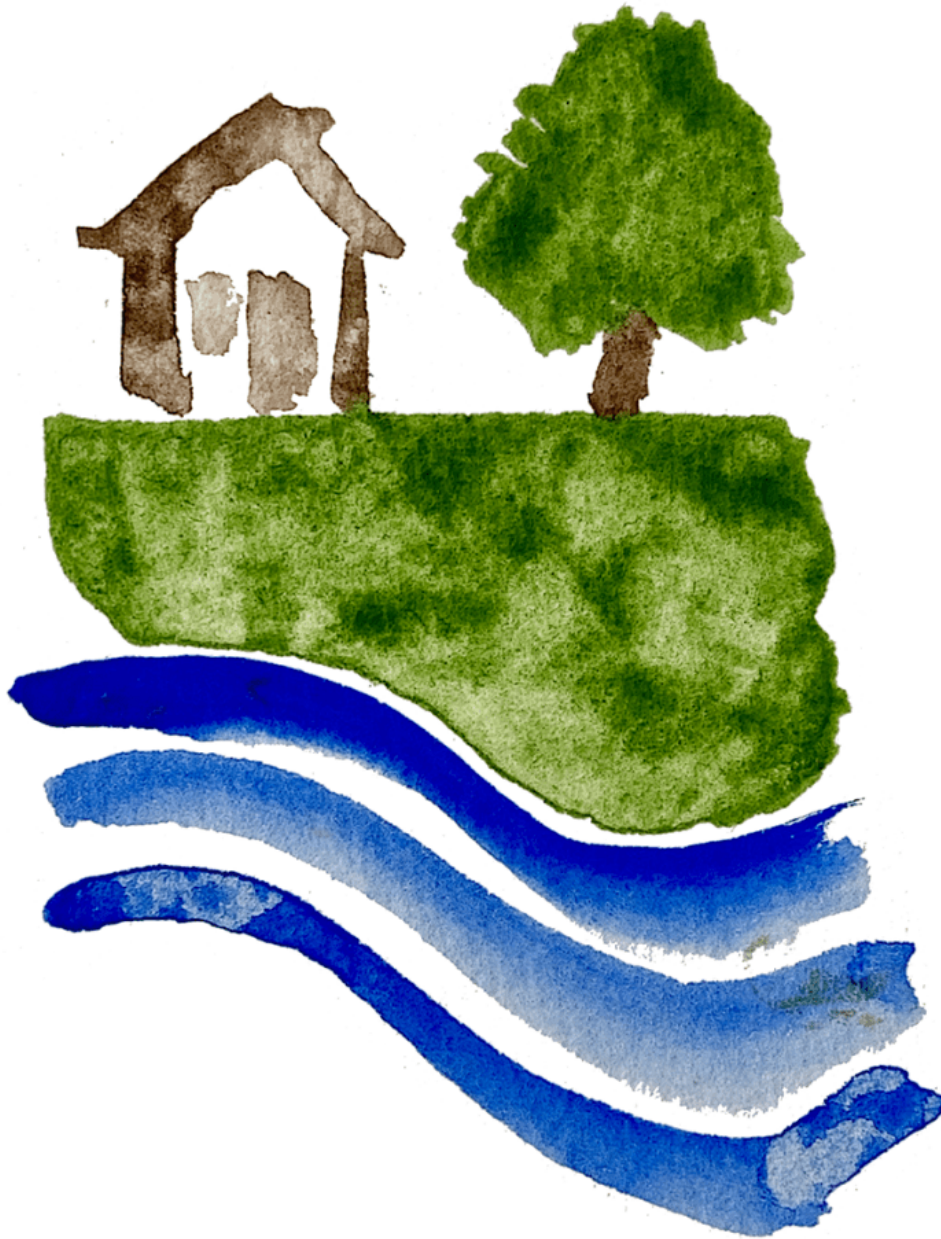


ILLUSTRATION BY ERIK SCHURINK

While the Farm Bill is the main federal funding program that is concerned with the agricultural system, several provisions in the IIJA are expected to support the revitalization of rural communities. For example, the funding for broadband expansion is largely expected to prioritize rural communities, those from communities of color, people with disabilities and low-income households. More affordable broadband in rural

areas could support small family farms by removing roadblocks to integrating technology into their operations that would allow them to compete with industrial agriculture.

The IIJA also includes \$618 million for the US Department of Agriculture's watershed programs. These programs protect and restore watersheds at a large scale—seeking to prevent erosion, support conservation practices on rural land, prevent flooding and support fish and wildlife habitat (among other benefits). These programs are administered through the Natural Resources Conservation Service, which has historically provided direct payments to farmers to help support agricultural practices that improve environmental outcomes.

Additionally, transportation investments are expected to improve the internal agricultural trade network which may help improve domestic agriculture. And finally, some of the transportation funding will go towards job training programs to get more women involved in the construction and trucking industries, which could help alleviate some of the supply shortages resulting from widespread trucker shortages across the country.

Equity



ILLUSTRATION BY ERIK SCHURINK

It is critical to acknowledge that investments in infrastructure have historically come with destructive and tragic impacts, for example the sweeping acute damage to low-income communities and communities of color through the construction of urban expressways, as well as the more systemic damage of years of neglect and racism for low-income communities and communities of color.

COOP MEMBERS AND THE COOP ITSELF STAND TO BENEFIT FROM THESE INVESTMENTS IN A NUMBER OF WAYS.

On paper at least, the IIJA is supposed to work to remedy that reality. This is expected to be accomplished through the Biden Administration's Justice 40 Executive Order which requires 40 percent of the overall benefits from Federal investments in climate and clean energy to flow to disadvantaged communities. Since programs will be administered by States and Tribes, it will be critical for local communities to keep elected leaders accountable to this goal (in addition to the Federal government).

Jobs



ILLUSTRATION BY ERIK SCHURINK

Given that the word “Jobs” is in the name of the Bill, it should be unsurprising that hundreds of billions of dollars in infrastructure spending are expected to create millions of jobs over the coming decade. The majority of these jobs will be in professions historically dominated by men (90% of jobs), and requiring a high school diploma or less (53% of jobs). Approximately 2.4 million of these jobs are expected to be in the Mid-Atlantic, benefitting the New York region significantly.

What does this mean for the Coop?

Coop members and the Coop itself stand to benefit from these investments in a number of ways:

- **Public transit will become more accessible** to New Yorkers with disabilities and bike lanes expanded, making access to the Coop for those living further away much easier and safer. The Coop itself (entrance, shopping aisles, floors, bathroom) is wheelchair-accessible.
- **Small farms that supply the Coop are likely to receive direct support** in the form of increased broadband connectivity as well as direct payments for environmental conservation efforts.
- **Lead in drinking water could become a thing of the past** as the city finally gets additional funding to replace service lines. The Coop does not have lead pipes, although the pipes have not been tested for lead according to General Coordinator Joe Holtz.
- **Supply shortages may abate in the medium term** through funding for job training and re-training programs, especially for truckers and construction workers.

While all of these benefits are promising, ultimately it will take civic participation and committed elected leaders to ensure that these programs deliver positive benefits for communities. The coming five years will be an important time to engage at the local level to support projects that improve quality of life for City residents and our broader region.

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