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## Texas' water infrastructure not making the grade

By John Austin Daily Sun State Reporter Oct 19, 2018



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Complaining about water when reservoirs are filling after a long, dry Texas summer may seem a little ungrateful.

But in a place that grows by 100 residents a day, building and maintaining water infrastructure is crucial, and according to a recent report, Texas is struggling to cope with the multi-billion-dollar water challenge

Texas scored a D-plus in drinking-water infrastructure on the latest American Society of Civil Engineers Infrastructure Report Card, up from D minus in 2012, and a D in wastewater, down from a C minus in 2012.

The combined estimate to address those combined water-infrastructure issues over the next 20 years is about \$46 billion in Texas, according to the ASCE.

Rockdale, about 60 miles northwest of Austin, only has a population of about 5,600, but it's experiencing water-infrastructure problems that are part of the larger picture.

"They're on the verge of collapse," said Meg Walsh, a candidate for Texas Senate District 5 who made a recent Rockdale campaign stop. "Their clean-water pipes are rusty.

"Their wastewater pipes are made of clay; they have the possibility of a breach. The filtration piece needs to be replaced as well."

The report card evaluated seven infrastructure categories.

Chris Whittaker, Rockdale's city manager, is all too familiar with the kind of shortcomings that led to Texas' underwhelming water-infrastructure grades.

"We had a fire hydrant burst a couple of weeks ago," Whittaker said. "It was shooting 850 gallons a minute out."

Rockdale suffers a host of water-infrastructure problems, and as Walsh said, "they need a whole bunch of money."

The city draws its water from the Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer.

The aquifer is high iron and manganese content, and the filtration system dates back to the mid-20th century.

Minerals collect in Rockdale's pipes "like a hardened artery," and leave white towels red, Whittaker said.

"We've got 26,000 linear feet of asbestos/concrete pipe; they don't make that anymore," Whittaker said. "Every time we have a break it costs us \$6,000 to special clamp on our main line."

That's not all.

Rockdale is hoping to get \$14 million in state aid to fix wastewater infrastructure, Whittaker said.

"The city needs to make improvements to its sewer collection and treatment system to stay within permitted limits," according to documents Rockdale filed with the Texas Water Development Board. "Improvements and rehabilitation of the city's sewer infrastructure, including improvements, repairs and upgrades to the (wastewater treatment plant), lift stations, manholes and sewer lines."

The city recently cleared a hurdle when the TWDB accepted Rockdale into a clean water state revolving fund.

If approved, money from a low-interest loan would go toward wastewater infrastructure.

Rockdale isn't alone in seeking money from the state fund.

The list of cities covers 32 pages and includes Athens, which applied for \$2,405,463; Cleburne, which requested \$40,135,612; and Jacksonville, asked for about \$5.5 million.

The cost to upgrade Rockdale's drinking-water infrastructure: about \$48 million.

Whittaker said his city may have to raise rates to cover some of those costs.

Texas' overall infrastructure, the report card grade was C minus, down from a C in 2012.

"Though several of the infrastructure categories reviewed show areas of satisfactory performance, the clear majority indicate that Texas' infrastructure lacks funding, proper maintenance, and is poorly equipped to deal with environmental change as Texas continues to grow," according to the report card.

Don McGhee, past president of the Texas Water Quality Association and its national counterpart, said the report was credible.

McGhee doesn't specialize in wastewater.

But as for the drinking-water grade, McGhee said that at a time when Texas population is growing and infrastructure is aging, "to move from a D minus to a D plus means there's some serious movement in a positive direction.

"This is like swimming upstream in the Llano River yesterday."

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Online: [www.infrastructurereportcard.org/state-item/texas/](http://www.infrastructurereportcard.org/state-item/texas/)

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