

# Southland mayors sound off about money woes squeezing small towns

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While two members of Congress listened to local mayors voice concerns about deteriorating infrastructure and reduced municipal services at a forum in an East Hazel Crest office on Monday, a crew outside worked to repair a broken main that disrupted water service to the building.

The broken main rendered the bathrooms temporarily unusable and seemed to perfectly illustrate the topic, “The Future of America’s Cities and Towns.” U.S. Rep. [Dan Kildee](#), D-Mich., invited south suburban mayors to share examples of how financial stress and austerity measures are reducing such essential public services as police and fire protection and public works.

“We’re trying to get a better understanding of the challenges communities face,” Kildee said. “There’s not a deep and ongoing, sustained discussion about the condition of America’s cities and towns.”

Kildee said he launched the series of forums after [lead contamination](#) in pipes affected the health of thousands in his hometown of Flint. Monday’s discussion was the fourth in a series and the first held outside Washington, D.C.

U.S. Rep. [Robin Kelly](#), D-Matteson, co-hosted the forum at the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association office.

“As the proverbial crossroads of the nation, we have new and innovative transportation systems designed and planned to link us better regionally and globally,” Kelly said. “Yet, we have empty storefronts and commercial blight.”

As local and state governments are squeezed for resources to maintain services, federal resources are needed to address aging infrastructure systems, municipal leaders said.

“The one nice thing I say about (former President) Richard Nixon is revenue-sharing,” Park Forest Mayor John Ostenburg said. “When I first got on the Park Forest Village Board as a trustee in the 1980s, federal revenue sharing was in place and we used that for loads of good programs at the local level.

“These were our dollars going to Washington and coming back to us and giving us the opportunity to decide how we were going to use it. That was critical.”

Park Forest was incorporated and entirely developed after World War II, Ostenburg said. The village has about 22,000 residents and about 70 miles of roads, water mains and sewer pipes.

Ostenburg said it will cost about \$1 million to replace each mile of Park Forest roadway, water main and sanitary sewer — for a total of about \$210 million.

“All of it is in need of replacement,” Ostenburg said.

Park Forest discontinued its health department and some recreation programs due to financial pressures, he said.

“We’ve been forced to designate things as essential and nonessential,” he said.

Public works is among areas experiencing cutbacks in Richton Park, Village President Rick Reinbold said.

“We used to salt all of our streets” when it snowed in the winter, he said. “Now, we only salt intersections.”

Kildee said local taxpayers are unable to shoulder the costs of replacing aging infrastructure.

“The cost of doing it wrong is a lot higher than doing it right,” Kildee said. “It’s not like we get to escape the cost.”

Michigan officials were trying to save tens of millions of dollars by switching Flint to a less-expensive water supply, Kildee said. But the resulting crisis caused lead contamination, sickened thousands, prompted lawsuits and led to criminal charges against state officials.

State and federal governments have since spent hundreds of millions of dollars addressing the crisis, which is still unresolved, Kildee said.

“You can’t take a balance-sheet approach,” Kildee said. “Austerity measures do not solve problems in a community.”

Flint’s police department has one-fourth as many employees as a decade ago and the city’s fire department is a third of its former size, he said. Local mayors said they’re starting to experience similar reductions in force by not filling vacancies as municipal employees retire.

“I see Flint, Michigan and the situation that occurred there as a perfect example of what will occur here if we don’t do what Flint should have done,” South Holland Mayor Don De Graff said. “We need to think of the south suburban region as a whole.”

State and federal dollars would help, he added, but more importantly lawmakers need to recognize the urgency of the need and adopt policies that will enable regions to succeed.

“We no longer have the ability to control our own destiny,” De Graff said.

Participants at Monday’s forum discussed how a third airport near Peotone could drive economic growth.

Towns are seeing their revenues decline for a variety of reasons, mayors said. The state is taking a bigger share of income and sales taxes than previously, Ostenburg said. Property taxes are dwindling due to closures of big-box commercial stores in towns like Matteson.

“In the last four months we’ve lost Target, Sam’s, Carsons and Toys R Us,” Matteson Mayor Sheila Chalmers-Currin said. “We know the big boxes will never return.”

Calumet City Mayor Michelle Markiewicz Qualkinbush said her town is experiencing a drastic reduction in property tax collections due to owners’ inability to pay.

“We did a big analysis of property taxes in our town and this year Calumet City lost \$4 million in property taxes,” she said. “Twenty-three hundred (property identification numbers) didn’t pay their taxes — businesses and residents.”

“We had an A bond rating,” she added. “Calumet City has its financial house in order. We’re now downgraded to an A-minus with a negative outlook just because of that property tax payment issue.”

To make up for the revenue lost due to the unexpected drop in tax collections, the city has not filled eight vacant positions in its police department — about 10 percent of its force, she said. Another six positions are vacant in the fire department, she said.

Lynwood Mayor Eugene Williams said the pattern of diminished state and federal support for local communities seems to have a “targeted” effect on Southland communities that are predominantly inhabited by black and Latino residents.

“It seems to be almost intentional,” Williams said. “It’s almost as though this is the region where we’re going to put all of the things that we don’t want to deal with. This is the region where we’re going to send as many low-income people as we possibly can.

“When I go through our region and I look at some of the things that used to be that have fallen apart, like Matteson, I see no reason for the deterioration that is happening.”

“I feel it’s all targeted,” Williams said.

Elizabeth Schuh, who works on policy and programming for the Chicago Metropolitan Agency on Planning, said some of the agency’s initiatives aim to address challenges specific to the Southland.

“Very high tax rates in the south suburbs pose a huge challenge to market investment,” she said. “Communities feel like they are cut to the bone.”

Schuh said the entire Chicago area — and not just the Southland — is experiencing challenges.

“The region as a whole is struggling,” she said. “We’ve recently begun to lose population. We’re not keeping up with our peers economically.”

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