

Senate approves bill to help replace lead water service lines

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The Senate unanimously approved legislation that would allow utilities to provide homeowners financial assistance to replace service lines containing lead.

The bill also would allow the utilities to increase rates to cover the cost of the program.

GOP Sen. Rob Cowles, who co-authored the bill, said lead in drinking water is a public health issue and said there is precedent for the government to step in to fund infrastructure.

Many of the lead laterals in the state are in Milwaukee County, and Cowles said the deal the city struck with Waukesha to provide drinking water from Lake Michigan could generate funds that also could help pay for replacing the lines.

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“This bill will empower water utilities, city councils to do the right thing,” Cowles said.

State Sen. Lena Taylor, D-Milwaukee, praised the bill, saying the cost of replacing the lines pales in comparison to the impact of lead in drinking water. She said it contributes to premature births, crime and education costs, among other things.

“We pay the costs,” she said.

Under the bill, a municipality would have to approve a resolution asking the Public Service Commission for permission to use ratepayer dollars to help replace private lead service lines. The assistance could be through a low- or no-interest loan or a grant that does not exceed two-thirds of the project cost.