

COMMUNITY WORKSHOP REPORT

Water and Wastewater Infrastructure Opportunities in Mississippi

Hattiesburg, Mississippi

On June 26th, 2025, Water Finance Exchange (WFX) and Communities Unlimited (CU) convened a water and wastewater infrastructure funding workshop in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. This workshop brought together local, state, and federal government agency officials, technical assistance providers, an array of water sector experts, and community leaders to discuss the funding programs available for small water systems, with a focus on small and rural communities.

Alexander Brandon, Environmental Services Area Director for CU, and Tommy Ricks, Community Support Director for WFX, provided opening remarks before presentations from state and federal funding agencies and technical assistance providers. Presentations focused on the financial and technical resources available to Mississippi communities to support the planning, funding, and implementation of water and wastewater infrastructure projects to meet public health, sanitary sewer, and economic development goals. Participants and presenters also discussed shared challenges and strategies to address water and wastewater infrastructure improvements.

WFX and CU would like to thank the presenters and exhibitors from:

- Mississippi State Department of Health
- Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality
- Mississippi Water and Pollution Control Operator's Association
- Mississippi Rural Water Association
- Moonshot Missions
- USDA Rural Development
- Veolia

Several key themes emerged from the workshop presentations and discussions, including:

Workforce Development Needs

Many participants reported challenges related to identifying a qualified workforce in several critical sectors of water system management. A shortage of certified operators was among the most prevalent of these concerns, echoing sentiments expressed nationwide. This is exacerbated by financial challenges, as small and rural communities report the challenges of providing a competitive salary and benefits necessary to attract and retain certified operators. Experienced operators and office clerks often leave smaller utilities seeking competitive pay benefits and professional



Attendees learn about asset management from Alan Barefield.

development opportunities in the industry.

The issue of operator shortage is compounded by an aging workforce in the water and wastewater sector. While sharing operators helps address the demand for operators, speakers and community leaders also discussed ways to expand job opportunities for operators and increase opportunities and interest among the younger generation

WORKSHOP REPORT - HATTIESBURG, MS

of water sector experts.

Attendees also raised the issue of experience and expertise in finance and accounting. Similar to certified operators, systems report shortages in clerical and administrative expertise, including preparation of audits and applying to various state and federal infrastructure funding programs. During the exhibitor session, community leaders were able to connect one-on-one with technical assistance providers and funders at designated booths to discuss their community's unique needs and address challenges in workforce development and financial capacity.



Tommy Ricks, Water Finance Exchange, talks with attendees about water and wastewater infrastructure.

Economic Development Opportunities

During the workshop, many speakers and attendees emphasized the need for adequate water and wastewater infrastructure to facilitate growth and development. An adequate supply of clean, safe drinking water is essential for residential development and local economic development. Proper sanitary sewage disposal and waste management is also necessary to attract industries that bring jobs, growth, and prosperity. Community representatives and state agency representatives spoke to the growth already occurring in Mississippi, and projected future growth. Communities in the region will need to begin developing greater infrastructure capacity to capitalize on that growth. Presenters who discussed funding opportunities for Mississippi communities gave examples of specific water and wastewater; for example, Dennis Jones of the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), outlined the range of projects that qualify for the Clean Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF), including

the rehabilitation of a clarifier at the Savanna Wastewater Treatment Plant, which helped boost the city of Jackson's local economy.

Technical assistance providers elaborated upon economic development opportunities through improved water and wastewater infrastructure by discussing regionalization opportunities for small, rural communities, which can range from multiple water systems simply sharing an operator, to technical interconnections.

Connecting Communities with Technical Assistance

For many communities, figuring out where to start the funding application process and finding the appropriate solutions for their specific needs can seem daunting. The structure of our workshops, in which representatives from government funding entities present summaries of each funding opportunity, its terms, and the eligible projects, technical assistance providers present the scope of services they can offer communities, and all water sector experts offer one-on-one conversations with community leaders during the exhibitor session, allows for community leaders to receive a large scope of both general and personalized information and assistance.

WFX and CU have financing programs that can rapidly deploy funds to communities for immediate needs. These funds can cover the cost to complete an audit or preliminary engineering report in order to apply to a state or federal program for a capital infrastructure project, and can also provide the matching funds necessary to leverage a grant. There were several questions related to adhering to federal procurement rules for selecting project engineers and the RFQ and selection process details including the minimum length of time necessary to obtain SOQ responses from engineers. Tommy Ricks addressed this specific question by citing Title 48 CFR that requires at least 30 days after publication of an RFQ before selection can begin and underscored that this and other requirements is why a community should strongly consider engaging with a technical assistance provider prior to planning water and wastewater infrastructure improvement projects.

These technical assistance providers, including the Mississippi Rural Water Association and the Moonshot Missions, are available to provide support to communities and systems in Mississippi. Many of their technical assistance services come at no direct cost.

Looking Ahead

Workshop presenters and organizations in attendance are working on hosting additional events across the state. If you would like to learn more about the funding programs or technical assistance services available to your community, please contact Nicole Ramirez at nramirez@waterfx.org.