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Solving Infrastructure Problems From the Bottom Up.

More and more, local governments are coming to understand that they can't count on Washington.

Walking down the streets of San Diego, it's not immediately apparent that the city is at the center of a technological revolution in infrastructure. That's because the technology, 3,200 sensors, is hidden inside the city's new street lights. The sensors collect data that will help the city save $2.5 million on electricity each year, track air quality, and improve traffic flow and parking. They can even be of use to public-safety first responders.

San Diego's smart lights are just part of the city's push to rebuild its infrastructure. Last June, voters approved the Rebuild San Diego ballot initiative, which will provide up to $4 billion for infrastructure projects over the next 25 years.

Expect to see more local and state governments taking infrastructure problems into their own hands. Given the realities of politics in Washington, they know the folly of waiting for the federal government to step in and save the day. And it's highly unlikely that any new infrastructure plan that did emerge from Washington would cover more than a fraction of the $4.6 trillion that the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) estimates it would cost to fix everything — more than the federal government spends in a year.

ASCE's latest report card gives America's infrastructure an overall grade of D-plus. And no one knows better than those at the local level how our deteriorating infrastructure makes us less competitive globally, not to mention the safety concerns it raises for the people who use crumbling bridges, overpasses and tunnels every day or who drink water that might be contaminated by sewage overflows, just to name a few issues. They need to take a page from San Diego's playbook and find creative ways to start solving infrastructure problems from the bottom up.

It's already beginning to happen. South Bend, Ind., for example, is a sewer overflow city. Hundreds of billions of gallons of raw sewage overflow into local rivers and lakes every year. Aiming to improve the situation, the city, under Mayor Pete Buttigieg, has begun using a system called CSOnet, developed by a local company, that collects data from sensors inside the sewers so the city can redirect water to empty pipes and reduce the overflows.

In Multnomah County, Ore., more than a third of the commercial buildings use more energy than they should. But the Building Ready Multnomah initiative, started by former County Commissioner Jules Bailey, helps finance capital improvements that reduce energy consumption or generate energy. The organization leverages public and private resources for the loans and encourages participants to use the savings generated from becoming more energy efficient toward seismic upgrades to prepare for natural disasters.

And as some Western states struggle to build up their renewable-energy infrastructure, other states, including California, have excess renewable energy capacity. California state Sen. Bob Hertzberg has proposed the creation of a regional grid operator and energy exchange to make it easier for

states to buy and sell energy to each other, which could reducing overall carbon dioxide emissions.

These efforts might seem small, but they can add up to a serious impact. With the continuing dysfunction in Washington, it may be years before we see a comprehensive federal infrastructure effort. But as these local leaders have shown, that doesn’t mean we can’t begin to improve our grade.

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