

The Answer is 12



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In February, on my usual drive home from work, I was stuck in horrendous traffic, crawling along between 2 and 5 mph, wondering what on earth was going on until I passed by a nasty water main break. Water was gushing right off the main street and into traffic, and water department vehicles were everywhere. I shook my head, thinking about the brutally cold temperatures outside and the crew working frantically to fix the problem.

Thirty minutes later, still in traffic, what seemed only a mile further, there was another obstacle: nearly a lane-wide sink-hole. This is when my patience ran dry and I couldn't help but think: "This is Chicago, what more can you expect? There is no money to keep up with dilapidating infrastructure, and even if the money was there, it is more likely to end up in cousin Vinny's pocket."

I did make it home eventually, and I nearly forgot about that day—except that I drive this way every day, and every day I pass by a sectioned-off patch of road marking the sinking pavement

that still causes major delays. At least the main break was fixed.

The fact of the matter is that cold weather is as much a culprit in water main breaks as severe drought conditions. Even when pipe is buried deep below the frost line, the ground will shift and the pipe will crack.

While not all water main failures are due to age alone, regular inspections and proper funding are key to infrastructure upkeep. Unfortunately, in recent years, investment in infrastructure has continued to sag.

Although our country spends billions on infrastructure each year, according to the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE), drinking water systems face an annual shortfall of about \$11 billion in funding needed to replace aging facilities that are near the end of their useful life and to comply with existing and future federal water regulations. Additionally, the condition of many of the nation's 16,000 wastewater treatment systems is poor due to a lack of investment in plants, equipment and other capital improvements over the years.

ASCE also has estimated that \$2.2 trillion is needed over a five-year period to bring the nation's infrastructure to a good condition. I don't know about you, but I actually have to pause to remember how many zeros are in a trillion dollars. The answer is 12.

What will happen if the money doesn't come? Will we let critical infrastructure fall apart?

One thing is certain: Our country's infrastructure is in need of a lot of help, specifically in the form of funding to ensure that infrastructure cuts today do not cut the quality of life for future generations. Sadly, there are a lot of zeros in a trillion.

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