**Ohio needs $12B to improve drinking water**

The Sandusky Register, Sept 28

Ohio has seen first-hand what happens when safe drinking water suddenly isn’t available. The challenge of maintaining public water systems across the state will carry an enormous price tag in the coming years as aging pipes and treatment plants will need repaired or replaced. Here’s a look at what Ohio is facing and the state’s use of federal loan money to keep water flowing out of the taps:

**STAGGERING COSTS**

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency projects it will cost $12.2 billion in Ohio alone over the next two decades to make sure public water utilities can continue to provide safe drinking water. That figure balloons to $384 billion nationwide, according to the agency’s 2011 estimate.  Most of the infrastructure-related money in Ohio — about $8 billion — will be needed for the network of pipes that distribute water, while an additional $2 billion is needed for water treatment projects. Add on $1 billion more for water storage projects.

**INCOMING AID**

Ohio has received $551 million since the mid-1990s through the largest federal aid program for improving drinking water systems, the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund.  But that’s not nearly enough to cover the costs of repairing and building the new infrastructure that’s needed, forcing cities to raise water rates in many cases.  Toledo, as an example, is looking to renovate its water treatment plant at a cost that could approach $350 million. It may include a system designed to destroy toxins produced by the algae that contaminated the water for two days just over a year ago. Water customers will pay for most of the renovations through a 56 percent rate increase.  Cities applying for loans from the revolving fund are first ranked by the state before it narrows down the recipients.  The state says sound management of the program has allowed it to give out loans that add up to more than double the amount that has come from the federal government in the last few years.

**SPENDING MONEY**

A review of the loan program by The Associated Press shows across the nation, there is more than $1 billion sitting unspent in government accounts, largely the result of project delays, poor management by some states and structural problems.  The U.S. EPA has called on states spend the backlog and wants any money dating back to 2013 to be off the books by next year.  Ohio has done a better job of spending down the money than all but two states after it streamlined and sped up the process of doling out the money to cities.  The state had $78 million in unspent funds in 2012, but now that amount has shrunk to under $5 million, or less than 1 percent of its share, sitting idle.