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## Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Good News, Bad News: Water in North Carolina

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There have been a lot of water issues in the news recently. Here's a summary of a few of the stories we've been following that involve the important and often complicated role state government plays.

**Bad News.** About a year ago, the NC Department of Health and Human Services advised hundreds of private well owners in Gaston and Rowan Counties that their well water was unsafe to drink due to levels of vanadium and hexavalent chromium that exceed state standards. This is about as bad as water news can get – throwing into question the safety of something as essential as water. This advisory was linked to continued concern over the impacts of improper coal ash storage and management. Later this advisory was lifted (see below), but not before the original advisory created a deep sense of concern.

**Good News.** In March of this year, North Carolina voters approved a state bond infrastructure referendum that will eventually lead to over three hundred million dollars in state funds to support water and wastewater projects throughout the state. This news comes on the heels of announcements by the Division of Water Infrastructure within the Department of Environment Quality and the State Drinking Water Authority that there are several new planning grant programs being offered to help address critical water issues across the state. A merger/acquisition program helps communities that want to investigate new regional partnerships with planning costs. A new asset management program provides funds to utilities in order to identify and better understand the status of the critical assets of their water system. Both new planning programs and the eventual bond dollars will begin to address some of the management issues that have plagued utilities, particularly smaller utilities across the state.

**Good News.** The State Department of Environmental Quality is not the only state agency concerned about water system management. The Office of the State Treasurer convened a special workshop in April to allow communities from across the state to share their water infrastructure challenges and practices. While many communities voiced concerns about financial and technical capacity, there were also many examples of innovation in the area that left the participants feeling optimistic that with creativity and innovation and a little state help, some of the challenges they face can be overcome.

**Good News?** Approximately a year after issuing the well water advisory, the NC Department of Health and Human Services rescinded their advisory. While this is arguably good news for the impacted well owners, media coverage has highlighted how difficult this situation has been and continues to be for the families that rely on these wells. The change in assessment of threat rests in the realization that the naturally occurring levels vanadium and hexavalent chromium in North Carolina are quite high and in some cases exceed the state ground water standards. The state ground water standards were established based on examining health risk data and setting very low risk tolerances — lower risk tolerances that typically are used in other water quality standards in other states and under the Federal Safe Drinking Water Act. This combined with the fact that the State of North Carolina, like many states have different water standards for groundwater and treated drinking water from public systems led to the realization that the water that was deemed a health hazard last year would actually meet the drinking water standards that are in place for the state's centralized public water systems. State agencies have expressed their regret at how circumstances played out in this situation and continue to address the fallout in terms of consumer confusion and distrust.

These stories and many other stories such as what is going on in Flint Michigan highlight the complexity of water management and the essential role that state government plays in both regulation and financing.