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L.A. City Council to closely monitor city's aging water system

After a main breaks in Studio City and a sinkhole develops in Valley Village, council members want to know how vulnerable the pipes are and call for the oldest to be replaced first.

By Jessica Garrison and Ruben Vives

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Los Angeles City Council members said Wednesday that they intend to more closely monitor upgrades to the city's aging, leaky water system after burst pipes in the San Fernando Valley inundated one neighborhood and caused a sinkhole in another that nearly swallowed a firetruck.

"Most folks recognize this as a wake-up call," said City Councilman Paul Koretz, who represents the Studio City and Valley Village neighborhoods where the burst lines created havoc, chewing up pavement and flooding homes and businesses.

Officials with the Department of Water and Power say they do not think the incidents are connected. The burst pipe in Studio City was a trunk line installed in 1914; the sinkhole in Valley Village stemmed from a rupture to a 6-inch service line built in 1969 that should have been good for several more decades.

But Koretz said he had a "lot of unanswered questions" about the incidents and the DWP's $4-billion program to replace miles of old, corroded pipe, including "how much of our infrastructure is ancient, and how much should we be looking at replacing immediately."

DWP officials defended their program, saying they intend to replace at least 32 miles of trunk line in the next few years. They have switched out nine miles in the last five years, they said. To pay for that and other repairs, the City Council last year authorized rate increases of about $2 per month per customer.

Councilwoman Jan Perry told DWP officials that she wants to make sure they focus their repairs on "those parts of the city that have the most aged water system."

DWP General Manager David Nahai pledged to provide much more detailed information to the council and the public about the water plan in the future.

But he also said that age, while a factor in determining a pipe's vulnerability, is not the sole criterion.

City officials also said they can't yet say how much the incidents will cost the city, although preliminary reports suggest it could be in the millions.

Jean-Pierre Bardet, head of USC's Civil Engineering Department, said the burst lines in the Valley are part of a larger, nationwide problem with aging drinking water infrastructure. A recent report put the tab for fixing aging pipes around the country at $255 billion.

In Studio City, residents continued cleaning up and fumed about the traffic jams resulting from the closure of

Coldwater Canyon Avenue.

Officials expect the major thoroughfare to be closed at least until the weekend.

Residents living adjacent to Coldwater Canyon, where DWP crews are making repairs on the broken water line, have put up handmade signs to keep commuters from attempting to drive through their neighborhood to gain access to the thoroughfare.

Says Edna Lee, a resident of Greenleaf Street who has been coping with detouring traffic in front of her home for days: "It's annoying."

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