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A water crisis puts Atlanta under another harsh spotlight

Water woes join other recent infrastructure meltdowns. Atlanta has overcome other high-profile incidents, city stakeholders say



Credit: John Spink / John.Spink@ajc.com Atlanta fire recruits hand out water to residents along West Peachtree Street in Midtown on

Tuesday morning. June 4, 2024.

By Savannah Sicurella and Zachary Hansen

Snowpocalypse. The I-85 bridge collapse. A blackout at the world's busiest airport. Atlanta's infrastructure failures tend to have a flair for the dystopian. Now 2024 has given Atlanta a water emergency.

Two significant water main breaks in Downtown and Midtown thrust Atlanta into several days of crisis, shuttering restaurants, canceling events and leaving upset residents boiling their water — assuming their taps still trickled. Thousands have been forced to rely on bottled water. Emory University Hospital Midtown had to temporarily move patients and divert ambulances.

No city wants to go viral for geysers spraying the streets, especially in its premier business district. The fact many residents first learned of the widespread issues from Megan Thee Stallion, who postponed her Atlanta concerts due to the outages, also highlighted city leaders' communication blunders.



Credit: AP

Joe Greene watches a water main break Saturday, June 1, 2024, in Atlanta. City officials were slowly repressuring the city's water system Saturday after corroding water pipes burst in downtown and Midtown, forcing many businesses and attractions to close and affecting water service in area homes. (Hyosub Shin/Atlanta Journal-Constitution via AP)

Five days in and thousands of residents were still under a boil water advisory Tuesday afternoon.

For the past few years, Atlanta has reveled in job growth, a building boom and the attraction of marquee events like next year's College Football Playoff National Championship and 2026 World Cup matches. Atlanta is also in the running to host the Sundance Film Festival starting in 2027, which typically draws in hundreds of thousands of film industry professionals and spectators each year.

The Rev. Keyanna Jones Moore, co-pastor of Park Avenue Baptist Church in Grant Park, said city leaders can't ignore Atlanta's foundation while chasing growth.

“Atlanta wants to look shiny and new on the outside, but on the inside we are dead and decrepit. And that is impacting our community,” she said outside Monday’s City Council meeting.

The series of pipe breaks will add to Atlanta’s list of infamous infrastructure incidents that won’t be quickly forgotten.

Site selection expert John Boyd, who works with companies to determine the best location for their businesses, said competition between states to win corporate relocations and major events is the most intense it has ever been. Boyd calls it the “second war between states.”

While companies and event hosts eyeing Atlanta will take notice and could be given pause by worries of shoddy infrastructure, business leaders and city stakeholders emphasize Atlanta will rebound.

“This, in the grand scheme of things, will be a blip on the radar screen,” Boyd said.

Past challenges

The 2014 “Snowpocalypse” that snarled the city’s interstates for days cast doubt on Atlanta’s winter preparedness. The 2017 fire that caused the I-85 overpass to collapse exacerbated traffic issues in a city known for gridlock. The 11-hour blackout at the world’s busiest airport in 2018 also created an international logistical nightmare.

Central Atlanta Progress President and CEO AJ Robinson said the city has faced more challenging issues than one-off infrastructure failures. He said other issues such as tornadoes and violent demonstrations have seemed like they would have a long-term negative impact on the city. But growth in the city’s hospitality industry, along with the residential and office markets, indicates they haven’t had a lasting effect.

The city’s infrastructure is extremely strong in some areas, Robinson said. Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport is the busiest in the world. But in the last 100 years, the city has neglected its sewer and water system.

“I think this is an example that there’s ongoing work that needs to take place,” Robinson said.

Atlanta is a premier host for many events and a top destination for Fortune 500 companies to relocate or expand. Over the past decade, Microsoft, Google and Visa, among other fintech, retail and entertainment giants, established offices in Midtown.

Metro Atlanta Chamber CEO Katie Kirkpatrick, who is tasked with representing the region’s business interests, said every major infrastructure challenge has the potential to impact business recruitment.

“Water infrastructure, though the least visible, is possibly the most critical,” Kirkpatrick said Tuesday.



Credit: Video

Crews in Atlanta are working to fix ruptured water main lines that have caused citywide outages.

Boyd, the site selection consultant, said the business community expects value for its tax dollars, and will closely monitor the response to challenges like the water main breaks. They typically pay attention to the city’s urgency and cooperation between departments.

Atlanta largely failed that test, at least early on, Boyd said. The city and the Department of Watershed Management issued an alert at 8 p.m., hours after the first interruption, and waited another 12 hours to send another update. Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens was at a fundraiser in Memphis on Friday evening and didn’t return to Atlanta until Saturday morning, holding his first briefing for the public that afternoon. Dickens has apologized for the lack of communication.

“Disaster preparedness and communications during the recovery is a critical responsibility of city government,” Boyd said. “That’s what the business community is measuring.”



Credit: John Spink / John.Spink@ajc.com

Mayor Andre Dickens toured the ongoing water main repairs at West Peachtree Street in Midtown on Tuesday morning, June 4, 2024.

‘Rising to meet a challenge’

Outdated water infrastructure is not a problem unique to Atlanta. Water lines in hundreds of communities around the country are too old and overburdened. Atlanta has a mix of old infrastructure in some places and a building boom.

In Midtown alone, 46 high-rises were added between the years of 2018 to 2024, according to the Midtown Alliance civic and business group, and another 20 have either been proposed or started construction. During that window, the city’s population grew by roughly 100,000 people.

The effects of the water main breaks are still lingering, and only time will tell the full impact of the failure. But the weekend demonstrated the resilience of the community, CAP’s Robinson said.



Credit: John Spink/AJC

Crews are continuing to work on a broken main on West Peachtree Street at 11th Street in Midtown, with nearby residents warned of impacts to their water service as the crisis reached its fourth day Monday, June 3, 2024. Water had been gushing out of the broken main until Monday morning, when workers were seen pumping out water. (John Spink/AJC)

Restaurants found a way to serve their customers by shrinking their menu, beginning prep work hours ahead of time and providing portable toilets. The Fox Theatre served bottled water to guests at a wedding reception on Saturday night. Volunteers across the city handed out food and water to residents with interrupted service.