

THE PROFITS OF DISTRUST

BY
MANNY TEODORO
SAMANTHA ZUHLKE
DAVID SWITZER

DRINKING
WATER AND
DEMOCRACY

Creative director: Darick Ritter
Saves Art: Rachel Distler

script: Travis B. Hill

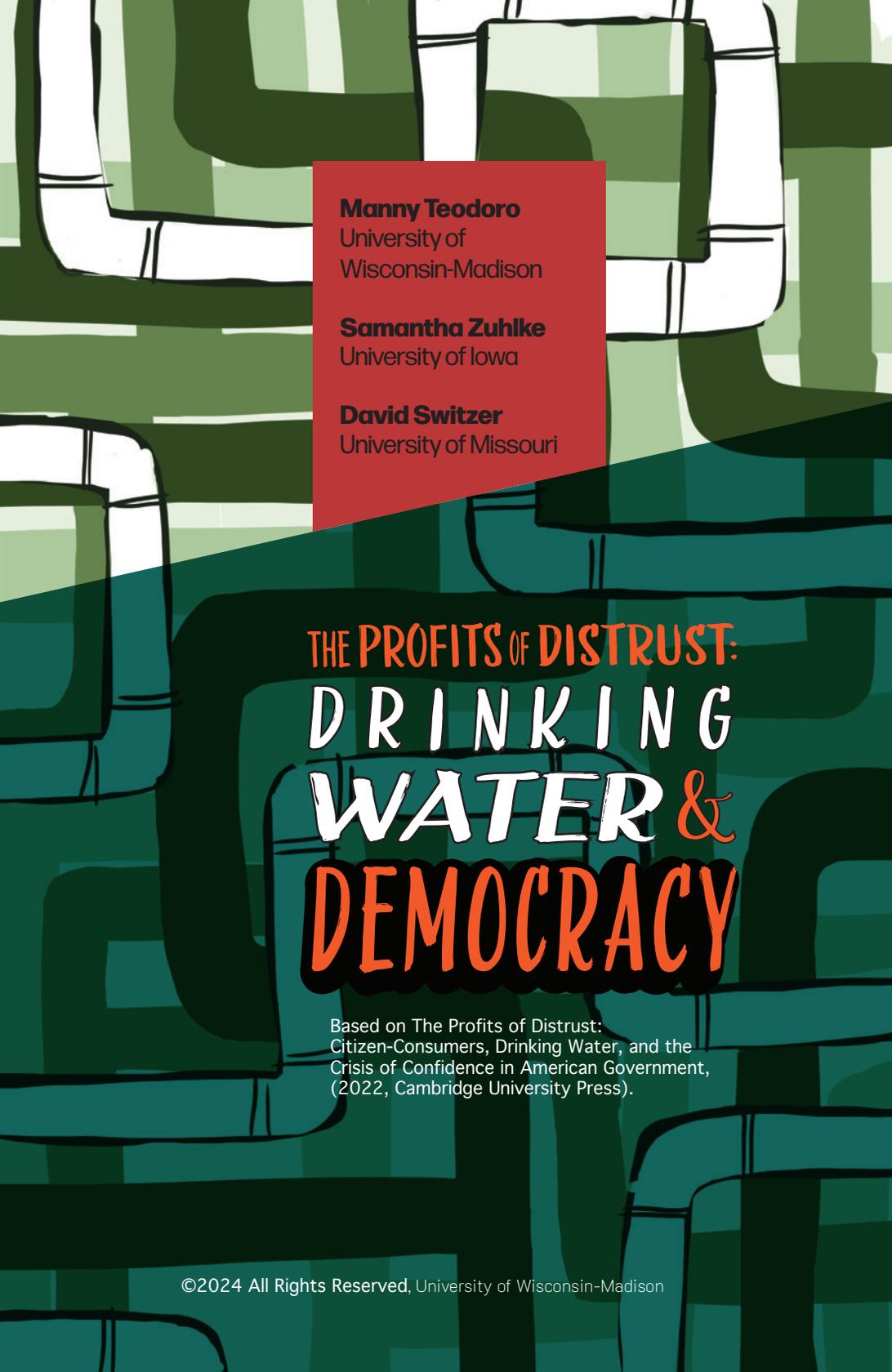
line art: Rachel Distler

color: Rachel Distler

letters: Micah Meyers

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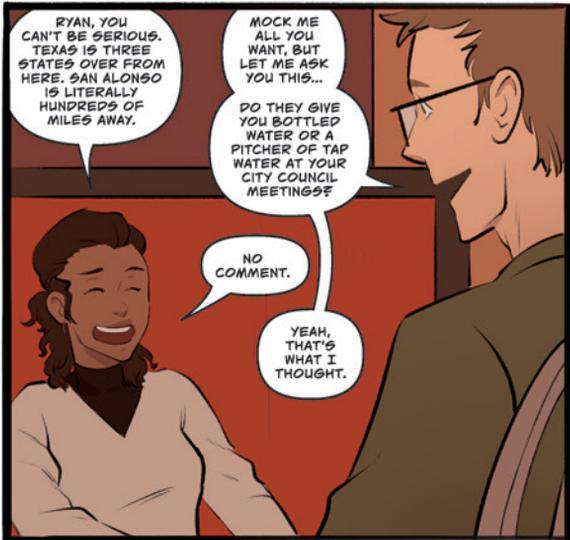
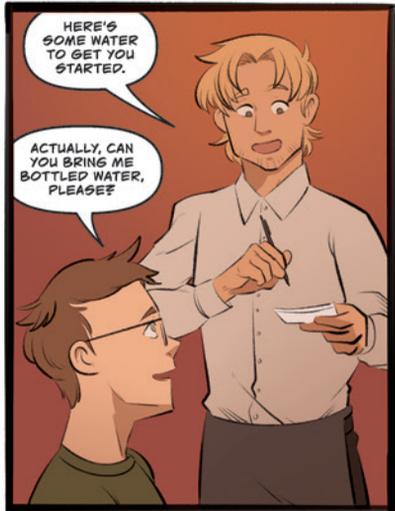
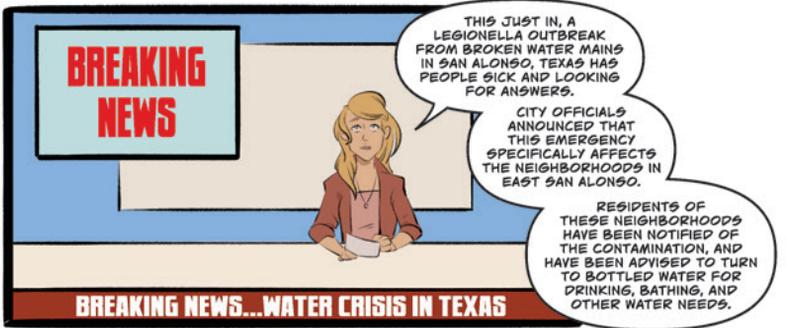
Manny Teodoro
University of
Wisconsin-Madison

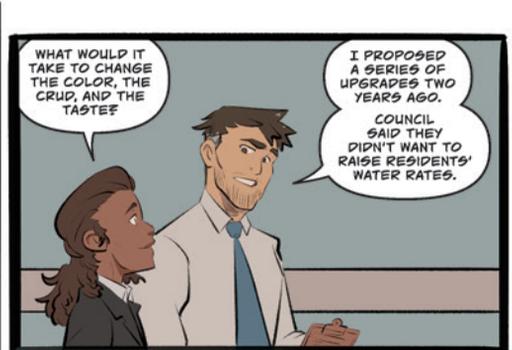
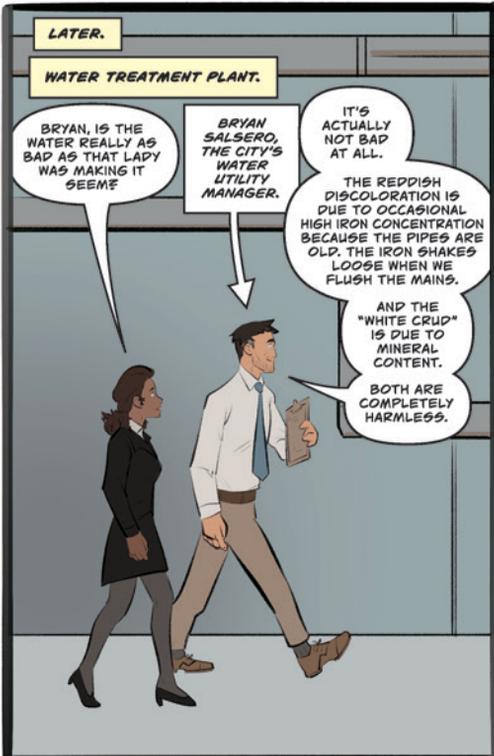
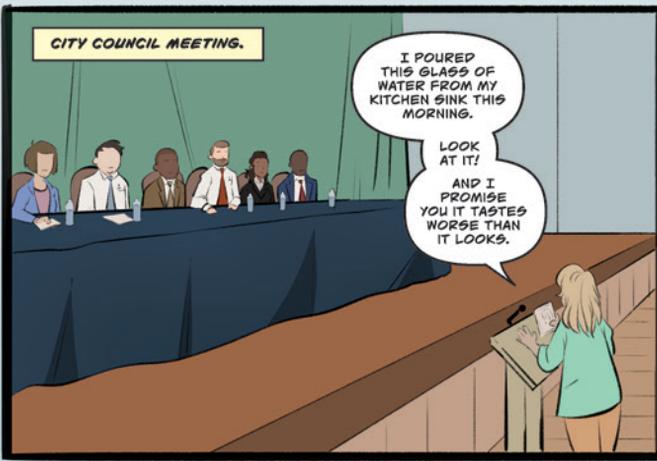
Samantha Zuhlke
University of Iowa

David Switzer
University of Missouri

THE PROFITS OF DISTRUST:
DRINKING
WATER &
DEMOCRACY

Based on *The Profits of Distrust: Citizen-Consumers, Drinking Water, and the Crisis of Confidence in American Government*, (2022, Cambridge University Press).







**KNOCK!
KNOCK!
KNOCK!**

ARE YOU
WALTER
BAKER?

YES, HOW
CAN I HELP
YOU?

I'M KALYAH
RAMIREZ, A
MEMBER OF
THE CITY
COUNCIL.



I'M OUT MEETING WITH RESIDENTS, ENCOURAGING THEM TO VOTE IN THE UPCOMING ELECTIONS.

LOOK, I'M SURE YOU MEAN WELL, BUT I HAVE NO INTEREST IN VOTING BECAUSE POLITICIANS HAVE SHOWN NO INTEREST IN HELPING ME OR THIS NEIGHBORHOOD FOR DECADES.



TAKE THAT WATER CRISIS IN TEXAS. A PRIME EXAMPLE IN A LONG HISTORY OF POLITICAL INEPTITUDE AND INDIFFERENCE.

AND IT'S ALWAYS PEOPLE LIKE US WHO GET THE WORST OF IT.

NOT THAT DIFFERENT HERE. EVERY WINTER WHEN IT GETS COLD, THE WATER MAIN BREAKS SOMEWHERE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD AND MY WATER PRESSURE DROPS.

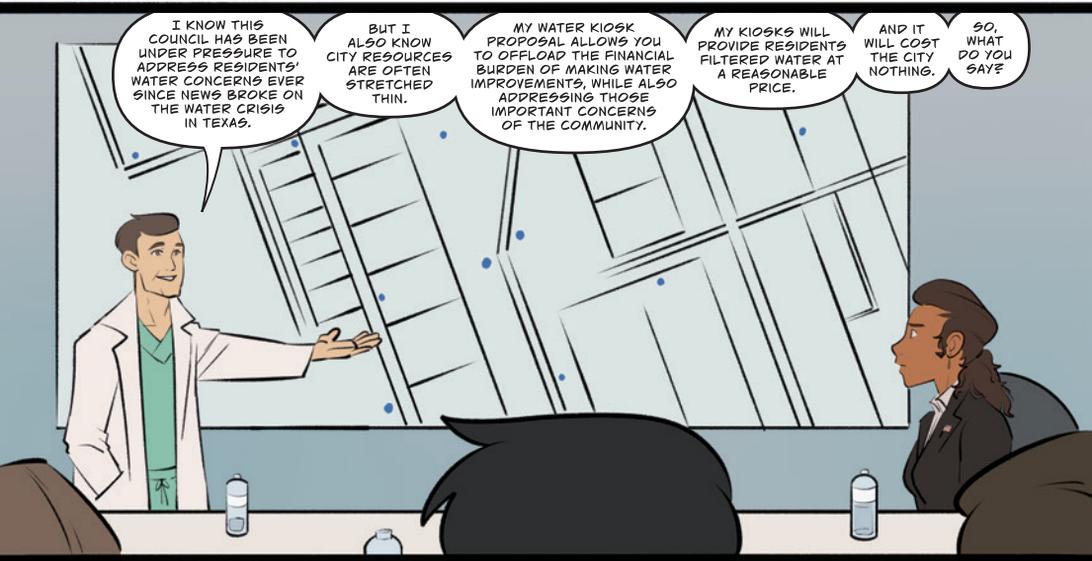
THEN WE'VE GOT TO BOIL THE WATER BEFORE WE CAN DRINK IT.

I'M TRYING TO MAKE THINGS LIKE THAT BETTER FOR PEOPLE AROUND HERE.



TELL YOU WHAT, WHEN MY TAP WATER IS RELIABLE, I'LL SHOW UP TO VOTE.

UNTIL THEN, YOU DON'T NEED TO WASTE A FLYER ON ME.



I KNOW THIS COUNCIL HAS BEEN UNDER PRESSURE TO ADDRESS RESIDENTS' WATER CONCERNS EVER SINCE NEWS BROKE ON THE WATER CRISIS IN TEXAS.

BUT I ALSO KNOW CITY RESOURCES ARE OFTEN STRETCHED THIN.

MY WATER KIOSK PROPOSAL ALLOWS YOU TO OFFLOAD THE FINANCIAL BURDEN OF MAKING WATER IMPROVEMENTS, WHILE ALSO ADDRESSING THOSE IMPORTANT CONCERNS OF THE COMMUNITY.

MY KIOSKS WILL PROVIDE RESIDENTS FILTERED WATER AT A REASONABLE PRICE.

AND IT WILL COST THE CITY NOTHING.

SO, WHAT DO YOU SAY?



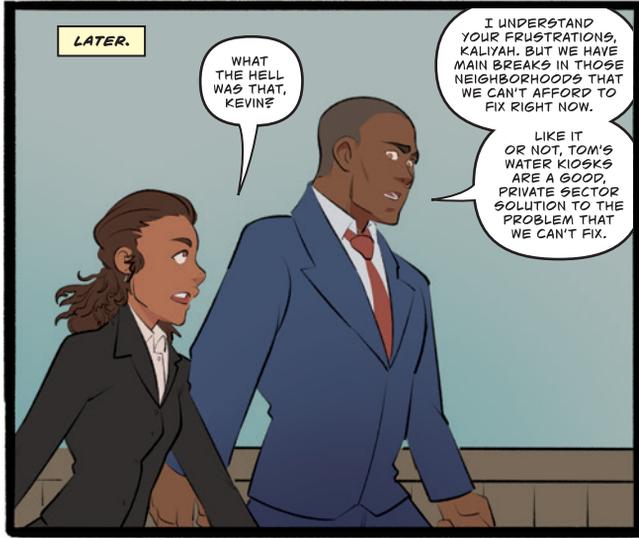
VERY IMPRESSIVE PRESENTATION, DR. WHEATLEY. JUST ONE QUESTION...

WHY IS IT THAT YOU ARE ONLY PLANNING TO PUT KIOSKS IN LOW-INCOME, MINORITY NEIGHBORHOODS?



DON'T MIND HER, TOM. WE ARE GOING TO APPROVE THE PERMITS FOR YOUR WATER KIOSKS.

WE WILL SEND THE ZONING PAPERWORK OVER TOMORROW.



LATER.

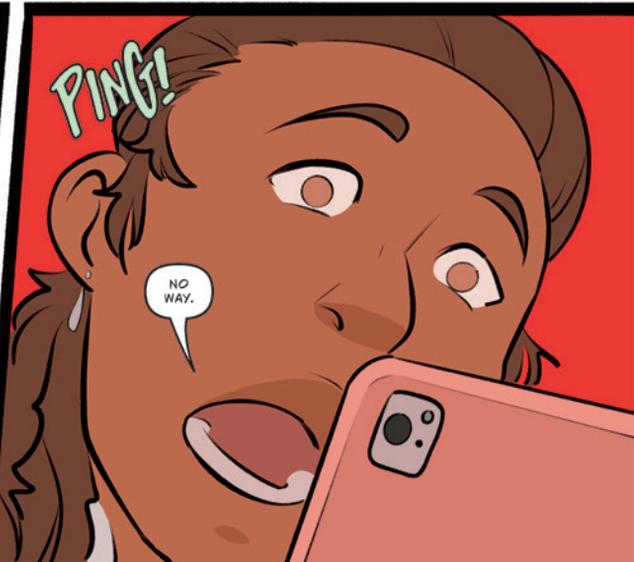
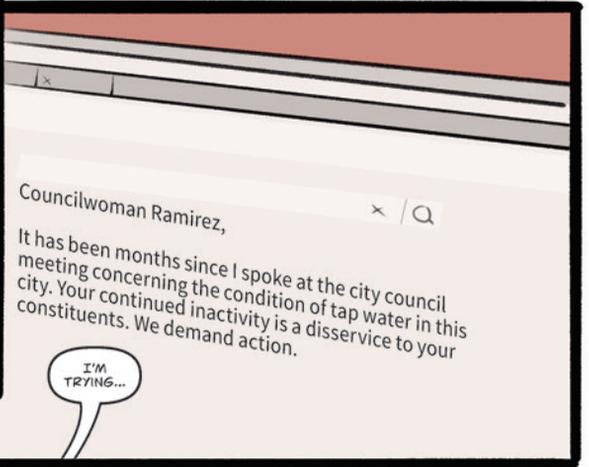
WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT, KEVIN?

I UNDERSTAND YOUR FRUSTRATIONS, KALYAH. BUT WE HAVE MAIN BREAKS IN THOSE NEIGHBORHOODS THAT WE CAN'T AFFORD TO FIX RIGHT NOW.

LIKE IT OR NOT, TOM'S WATER KIOSKS ARE A GOOD, PRIVATE SECTOR SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM THAT WE CAN'T FIX.



"CAN'T FIX" OR "WON'T FIX," KEVIN?





IT ONLY COST RESIDENTS ONE CENT FOR A GALLON OF TAP WATER FROM THE CITY. AT THESE KIOSKS A GALLON COSTS THIRTY-FIVE TIMES AS MUCH.

AND BOTTLED WATER IS EVEN MORE EXPENSIVE, COSTING AROUND \$1.85 PER GALLON.



HEALTH EXPERTS RECOMMEND PEOPLE DRINK THREE-FOURTHS A GALLON OF WATER A DAY.

THAT MEANS THE AVERAGE FAMILY OF FOUR WOULD DRINK ABOUT 90 GALLONS PER MONTH.

IF A FAMILY RELIES ENTIRELY ON BOTTLED WATER FOR THAT IN-TAKE IT COULD COST THEM AN EXTRA \$150-200 PER MONTH ON WATER.



THAT IS A HUGE AMOUNT OF MONEY FOR LOW-INCOME FAMILIES IN OUR CITY WHERE THOSE KIOSKS ARE LOCATED.

RESIDENTS HAVE LOST THEIR FAITH IN US AND IT'S COSTING THEM FINANCIALLY.



THEY CAN'T AFFORD TO PAY FOR OTHER NEEDS WHEN THEY ARE PAYING FOR BOTTLED WATER.



KALIYAH, A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO WE CONSIDERED A WATER MAIN REPLACEMENT PROGRAM.

BUT NO ONE FROM THE IMPACTED NEIGHBORHOODS SHOWED UP TO THE HEARING TO VOICE THEIR CONCERNS OVER SERVICE PROBLEMS.

YOU KNOW WHO DID SHOW UP?

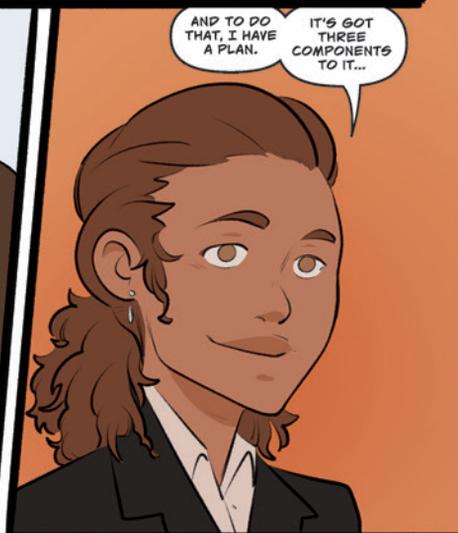
PEOPLE WITH BIG LAWS, WHO TESTIFIED AGAINST WATER RATE INCREASES.



IF YOU WANT TO MAKE THE TYPE OF CHANGES YOU'RE PROPOSING, YOU'RE LIKELY TO LOSE RE-ELECTION WITHOUT THE SUPPORT OF THE RESIDENTS.

AT THE END OF THE DAY, YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO GET PEOPLE TO SUPPORT WATER RATE INCREASES.

THAT'S WHY IT'S IMPORTANT TO DEMONSTRATE THAT IN EXCHANGE FOR A RATE INCREASE, PEOPLE ARE GAINING SOMETHING EXTREMELY VALUABLE.



AND TO DO THAT, I HAVE A PLAN.

IT'S GOT THREE COMPONENTS TO IT...

"FIRST, **OPENNESS**. WE NEED ACTIVE OUTREACH."



"I WILL LEAD A TEAM OF WATER DEPARTMENT PERSONNEL TO CANVAS NEIGHBORHOODS, TO LISTEN TO AND RECORD PEOPLE'S CONCERNS."



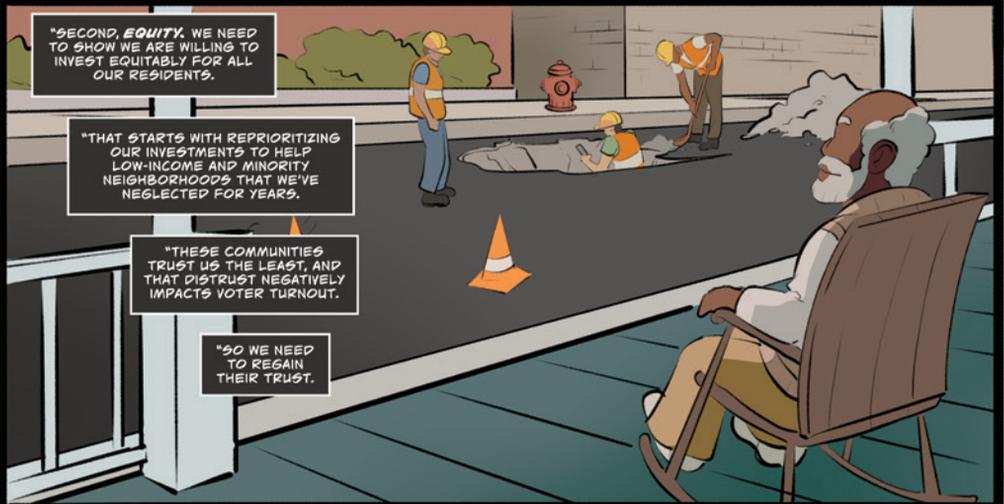
"INSTEAD OF ASKING THEM TO SHOW UP TO A MEETING ON THEIR OWN TIME."

"SECOND, **EQUITY**. WE NEED TO SHOW WE ARE WILLING TO INVEST EQUITABLY FOR ALL OUR RESIDENTS."

"THAT STARTS WITH REPRIORITIZING OUR INVESTMENTS TO HELP LOW-INCOME AND MINORITY NEIGHBORHOODS THAT WE'VE NEGLECTED FOR YEARS."

"THESE COMMUNITIES TRUST US THE LEAST, AND THAT DISTRUST NEGATIVELY IMPACTS VOTER TURNOUT."

"SO WE NEED TO REGAIN THEIR TRUST."



"AND THIRD, **EXCELLENCE**. WE HAVE TO CARE ABOUT THE AESTHETICS OF THE WATER."

"IT'S NOT ENOUGH TO ENSURE THE CITY'S TAP WATER MEETS SAFETY REGULATIONS."

"WE HAVE TO PROVIDE PEOPLE WITH WATER THEY ENJOY DRINKING."

"THAT'S WHY WE NEED TO INVEST IN A NEW FILTRATION TECHNOLOGY, TO OFFER WATER TO OUR RESIDENTS THAT ISN'T JUST SAFE BUT ALSO TASTES AND LOOKS GOOD."



"A GOVERNMENT EARNS LEGITIMACY WHEN IT PROVIDES FOR ITS PEOPLE'S BASIC NEEDS."

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR ALL YOU'VE DONE WITH YOUR TAP WATER RESTORATION PROGRAM.

HEY COUNCILWOMAN!

"AND NOTHING IS MORE BASIC THAN WATER."

"WE BATHE OUR CHILDREN IN IT."

"WE TAKE IT INTO OUR BODIES."

"IT'S A DEEPLY INTIMATE PUBLIC SERVICE. OUR INVESTMENT IN OUR WATER SYSTEM OUGHT TO REFLECT ITS IMPORTANCE IN OUR LIVES."

"BUT IT'S ABOUT MORE THAN TAP WATER."

STRAIGHT FROM MY KITCHEN SINK.

ELECTION DAY!

"WHEN PEOPLE TRUST PUBLIC SERVICES, THEY TRUST THE INSTITUTIONS THAT PROVIDE THEM—AND THEY INVEST THEMSELVES IN GOVERNING."

NOW IF YOU'LL EXCUSE ME, I HAVE TO CAST MY VOTE.



Manny Teodoro

La Follette School of Public Affairs
University of Wisconsin-Madison
<https://MannyTeodoro.com/>



Samantha Zuhlke

School of Planning and Public Affairs
University of Iowa
<https://SamanthaZuhlke.com>



Creative Director
Darick Ritter

Script
Travis B. Hill

Cover Art
**Rachel Distler,
Darick Ritter**

Lettering
Micah Meyers

Page Art
Rachel Distler

www.SPComics.com



David Switzer

Truman School of Public Affairs
University of Missouri
<https://davidswitzerphd.com>

Why do people choose expensive, environmentally destructive bottled water, rather than cheaper, sustainable, and more rigorously regulated tap water?

Basic services are the bedrock of democratic legitimacy.

Failing, inequitable basic services cause citizen-consumers to abandon government in favor of commercial competitors.

This vicious cycle of distrust undermines democracy while commercial firms reap the profits of distrust.

But the vicious cycle can also be virtuous...

Rebuilding confidence in American democracy starts with literally rebuilding the basic infrastructure that sustains life.

Excellent basic services build trust in government and foster greater engagement between citizens and the state.

creative director: Darick Ritter

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color: Rachel Distler

letters: Micah Meyers

JSP COMICS



Robert M. La Follette
School of Public Affairs
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON