Southland History Collective

From WPA to Water Pipes: Harvey, Illinois and the Legacy of the New Deal: *To what extent did New Deal-era public works projects create lasting improvements in Harvey, and how do they compare to the city's current challenges?*

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Suggested Grade Level Range: 11-12

Connections to U.S. History Curriculum

This lesson connects the federal response to the Great Depression with contemporary debates on infrastructure, inequality, and urban decline. Students use Harvey, Illinois as a case study to trace the long-term effects of New Deal programs and analyze the challenges facing former industrial towns today. This comparative lens fosters historical thinking about continuity, change, and civic policy.

Local Context

Harvey, a Southland community shaped by industrial growth and federal investment during the 1930s, benefited from New Deal programs such as the WPA and CWA. Today, Harvey faces pressing infrastructure failures, water contamination, and economic instability. This lesson explores the legacy of federal intervention and asks what role government should play in revitalizing local communities like Harvey.

Student Learning Objectives

- *I can evaluate the long-term effects of New Deal public works on local communities*
- *I can compare and contrast historical and modern government policies in Harvey*
- *I can propose and defend civic solutions based on historical precedent*

Standards Addressed

- SS.H.2.9-12: Analyze change and continuity in historical eras
- SS.CV.6.9-12: Evaluate public policies and their impact on communities
- SS.H.4.9-12: Use historical sources and evidence to support historical reasoning

Materials Used

Sources for Supporting Question 1	Sources for Supporting Question 2	Sources for Supporting Question 3
• Source A: Better Communities Through the WPA • Source B: Illinois Civil Works Administration Report (1934)	• Source A: EPA Announces Partnership with City of Harvey, Illinois to Accelerate Replacement of Lead Water	• Source A: Sen. Tammy Duckworth Announces $3.5 Million from EPA to Upgrade Harvey Water Infrastructure

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• Source C: Workers Service Program: Rockford, Illinois	Pipes and Protect Public Health • Source B: Harvey Family Holds Out as MWRD Flood Control Project Moves Forward • Source C: Forgotten Illinois Harvey: Fixing a Broken City in a Broken State	• Source B: Harvey Residents Decry Flood Control Project that will Cost 15 Families their Homes • Sources for Supporting Question 2 are relevant for Supporting Question 3 as well

Procedure

Anticipatory Set/ Staging the Compelling Question

- Project two contrasting images:
  - A 1930s photograph of a New Deal-era infrastructure project in Illinois (e.g. a WPA construction crew)
  - A recent photo of crumbling water infrastructure or flooded streets in Harvey
- Discussion Questions:
  - What do you notice in each photo?
  - What might these images say about the role of government in maintaining communities over time?
  - Should the government still be responsible for fixing problems like these today?
- Use this discussion to launch the compelling question: *To what extent did New Deal-era public works create lasting improvements in Harvey, and how do they compare to the city's current challenges?*

Supporting Question/Activity 1: *How did New Deal programs shape towns like Harvey during the Great Depression?*

- **Reading/Analyzing Sources**:
  - Students analyze WPA promotional materials and the Illinois Civil Works Administration Report from 1934
  - They explore how federal investment impacted infrastructure, employment, and public morale in towns like Harvey, Rockford, and Springfield
- **Performance Task**: In groups, students create a short visual profile of Harvey in the 1930s, including key federal programs, infrastructure projects, and demographic changes. These can be displayed as posters or digital slides

Supporting Question/Activity 2: *How do the long-term effects of New Deal investment compare to Harvey's present-day infrastructure crisis?*

- **Reading/Analyzing Sources**:
  - Students read and annotate current news articles, EPA press releases, and federal funding documents related to Harvey's water crisis and disinvestment
  - They compare these with New Deal-era reports to identify continuities and changes in federal-local relationship
- **Performance Task**: Students complete a Venn diagram or two-column chart comparing the government's role in Harvey's infrastructure in the 1930s and 2020s

Supporting Question/Activity 3: *What can we learn from Harvey's past to inform future revitalization efforts?*

- **Reading/Analyzing Sources**:
  - Review excerpts from Sen. Duckworth's statements and recent federal grant proposals

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- Analyze how past successes and failures of federal investment can guide new civic action
- **Performance Task:** Students write a policy proposal or create a civic infographic advocating for infrastructure improvements in a Southland community. They must cite lessons from both past and present

Assessment Options

Construct an argumentative policy proposal or create a civic infographic addressing: *What lessons can Harvey's New Deal legacy teach us about infrastructure, equity, and the role of government today?*
Students must:

- Use evidence from at least one historical (1930s) and one modern (2000s-2020s) source
- Clearly explain the challenges Harvey has faced and any parallels between eras
- Recommend a solution or policy direction for Harvey or a similar Illinois town
- Optionally present findings in a debate, public hearing simulation, or short class presentation

Informed Action

Students create a civic briefing or infographic that outlines a plan for revitalizing Harvey or a similar Illinois town. These can be shared with local civic organizations, school officials, or included in a digital SHC student research exhibit on urban infrastructure.

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