

Waterlogged neighborhood in south Minneapolis pleads for help

High water levels have wreaked havoc in a section of south Minneapolis, flooding basements, turning fields to marshes and causing sewer lines and pipes to break.

By Eric Roper (<http://www.startribune.com/eric-roper/62906482/>) Star Tribune |

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Residents of a waterlogged section of south Minneapolis are speaking out about staggering repair bills for broken pipes, flooded basements and fields turning to marshes as incessant rains have worsened groundwater problems (<http://www.startribune.com/high-water-opens-sinkholes-shifts-foundations-in-south-minneapolis/477651563/?refresh=true>).

High groundwater levels have wreaked so much havoc on one block near Lake Nokomis that crews are now working on their 10th job there repairing the plumbing that connects homes with city water mains and sewers. And quicksand-like soil is raising the cost of those repairs to upward of \$18,000 in some instances — or in one case as high as \$30,000.

Concerned residents sought solutions from government officials Tuesday night at a community meeting at First Free Church. An array of agencies have been studying the problems and plan to summarize their findings later this year.

“If the homeowners need to all have their homes bought out and move away because Minneapolis is a swamp, then fine,” resident Teresa Engstrom told the gathering of about 70 people. “But don’t just leave us at the bottom of the storm sewer.”

The city says this is the approximate area of concern” regarding groundwater issues near Lake Nokomis.



Many sought more action and coordination from government to prepare for historic rainfalls that are expected to become more common because of climate change. Others objected to the Park Board’s plans (<http://www.startribune.com/park-board-votes-to-reduce-pumping-at-hiawatha-course-changing-the-landscape-of-property/489184961/>) to dramatically reduce pumping of groundwater from flood-prone Hiawatha Golf Course.

“When you know what’s coming, then you have to help your cities become resilient,” said Joan Soholt, who has been organizing over the issue, in an interview. “And if you know that your infrastructure is already problematic — because it’s historically been that way — then you better start thinking ahead, because you end up with flooded homes.”

Soholt told the meeting that mapping out the problems has been difficult because some people are afraid to speak up out of concern for their home values. She said a neighbor’s

home sale fell through after the water issues came to light.

Rep. Jean Wagenius, DFL-Minneapolis, told the crowd that there will be bigger rain events in the future.



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Amy Moeller, above, showed the sinkhole that appeared in front of her house this wet summer. The sewer pipe below will cost her



RENEE JONES SCHNEIDER, STAR TRIBUNE

A crew worked Tuesday in Minneapolis’ Lake Nokomis neighborhood to repair a sewer break likely caused by the summer’s high water table.

“We’ve known this for years and years and years,” Wagenius said. “The problem is that government has not yet adapted to that change.”

Consolidating research

Rooting out the causes of the problem and finding possible solutions has required coordination among a dizzying number of government agencies responsible for land and water use around Minnehaha Creek. The creek drains a critical part of the metro, from Lake Minnetonka to the Mississippi River.

The creek also serves as an outflow for Lake Nokomis, but only when creek levels are low enough to open a barrier that separates the two bodies of water. Soholt would like to see cities upstream “deal with the water where it falls” rather than expelling it into the creek.

The Minnehaha Creek Watershed District is leading an effort to condense more than 70 studies into one report. Professors from the University of Minnesota will then review it.

The agencies [sent out an update Tuesday](http://www.minneapolismn.gov/publicworks/stormwater/nokomisgroundwater)

(<http://www.minneapolismn.gov/publicworks/stormwater/nokomisgroundwater>) saying this year will be one of the wettest in recorded Twin Cities history, bookending what is already the wettest documented six-year period. The rains have raised shallow groundwater levels and bumped Lake Nokomis about 8 inches higher than last year.

James Wisker, administrator of the watershed district, said it is clear that unprecedented rains are contributing to the problem. But the study is examining the specific elements affecting its flow.

“What’s the impact of local geology on it? Or local infrastructure? Or development?” Wisker said. “Are there other factors that are influencing how that rain is recharging groundwater and expressing itself in the neighborhood?”

\$30,000 repair

Stephanie Johnson, Minneapolis’ director of surface water and sewers, said the city has heard anecdotally from residents about rising costs to perform repair work. City permit data show fewer lateral repairs in this area compared with last year.

Homeowners are responsible for repairs to the laterals, the pipes that connect home sewer and water to the city mainlines running down the street. The city this July informed Amy Moeller, who lives near Nokomis, that the lateral serving her home and her neighbor’s needed to be repaired. It had opened a sinkhole in the street.

Few of the contractors on the city’s list would even call her back. Because of the groundwater issues and a particularly deep pipe, the work is going to cost roughly \$30,000, split with her neighbor. The city offers financing so residents can pay for such costly jobs over time through their taxes.

“It’s been a nightmare,” Moeller said. “I have spent literally hours and hours and hours educating myself, making phone calls, doing e-mails, talking to [the city] about how does this financing work? I mean, we don’t know. We don’t have \$15,000 to fork over.”

The work will be performed by Cichy’s Water and Sewer. Mark Cichy, project manager for the firm, said a typical repair might cost about \$12,000. But removing groundwater can be unpredictable and sometimes take several days.

“If there’s groundwater, you can just easily take the number and double it,” Cichy said. “You try to put a straight number on it. But sometimes when you’re digging in the ground, it can be so saturated.”

He added that the repairs can have a ripple effect on nearby properties.

“It’s usually about every six months in that area, you’ll fix one and another one will pop up because the pressure just increased,” Cichy said.

Eric Roper is a metro reporter covering urban affairs in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. Since joining the Star Tribune in 2009, he has covered the city of Minneapolis, the state Legislature and Congress for the paper.

eric.roper@startribune.com 612-673-1732 StribRoper