

When will the flooding stop?

by Ray Smith

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Aug 21, 2011



It's a problem as old as Hoboken: Major flooding that had some residents on the western side of the city wading through the streets on their way home over the past few weeks.

As high rain events combined with high tide in the Hudson River, residents have discovered their cars in water, and have been forced to find alternate routes through the city.

But according to the North Hudson Sewerage Authority, the entity that operates the sewer system for Hoboken and other local towns, relief is on the way in the form of a wet water pump that will force water out of the streets of Hoboken and into the Hudson River. The water will be treated through filters before it is forced into the river.

The wet weather pump can force 100 million gallons of water out of Hoboken per day.

The pump, which costs approximately \$18 million, is scheduled to open in “the fourth quarter of 2011,” according to NHSA officials.

Approximately \$5 million of the price tag is covered by the American Resource Recovery Act (ARRA), a national grant program. The rest of the costs will be covered by the NHSA.

The pump is underground, and the only visible portion of the new system is an electrical building located on Observer Highway near Hudson Street, close to the New Jersey Transit terminal.

The wet weather pump can force 100 million gallons of water out of Hoboken per day. The pump's primary mission is to alleviate flooding in the southern and western portions of the city, where water backup is the worst.

Like many cities, Hoboken has a “combined sewer system,” meaning that rain and sewer water currently use the same pipes.

His first flood

Joseph Vayas, a downtown resident of Hoboken who moved into town recently, experienced his first flood in Hoboken last week.

Vayas said he couldn't walk down First Street during the flooding, and had to make his way up to Fourth Street just to go to the western side of the city. First Street is traversed by hundreds of commuters coming from the PATH trains and buses.

Richard Wolff, the chairman of the NHSA, released a statement last week about the recent flooding in Hoboken.

"In Hoboken," the statement read, "the intersections around Harrison and First Street, Jackson and Fourth Street, and Madison and Ninth Street experienced the worst of the street flooding, especially on Aug. 14 when an incredible 5.81 inches of rain fell in a 19 hour period, beginning at 1:50 a.m."

Why it floods

Wolff said that most of the city of Hoboken is below sea level.

In an interview, he said that last year, the goal for the pump was to be operational in May 2011. Unforeseen circumstances have delayed the opening.

The century old "outfall" pipes that run from the pump to the river are blocked with debris due to their age, similar to an artery blockage. Machines haven't been able to clean the outfall pipes, so employees must now go in and clean the pipes manually.

"They're clearing it by hand," Wolff said. "In July we doubled the Authority's authorized expense and doubled the man power for the cleaning so as to stay on our fourth quarter goal."

Parts of Hoboken's sewer system date back to the Civil War era, and are made of wood. The report from the NHSA says that the last of those sewers are being replaced, with the work expected to be completed in 2012.

Although many officials point to the opening of the pump as a major milestone in fixing flooding, Mayor Dawn Zimmer said she is not putting all of the city's eggs in the one basket, or in this case, one pump.

"This pump will significantly alleviate flooding in Hoboken," said Zimmer, who lives in the flood prone southwestern 4th Ward. Flooding was a major campaign issue when Zimmer first ran for office.

"We'll continue to do evaluations of pre-pump and post-pump data," she said. "We'll be able to evaluate what is the next best solution. I fully recognize that we're going to need to make sure we have a comprehensive solution. I can't say what the additional steps would be, but we'll be

able to see what the pump does and combine that with green technology solutions.”

The city has purchased EMNET sensors, which are placed in manholes throughout the city, to detect where water is flowing through the system during rain events.

High tide meets heavy rains

Wolff said that right now, “The rain water flows into the sewer system through outfalls into the [Hudson] River. But at high tide the water cannot empty into the Hudson. Consequently, the rain water backs up the sewer system until the system is completely filled with water, forcing it out into the lowest lying streets.”

Since the sewer system is connected throughout the city, officials believe that alleviating flooding in the southwest portion of the city may benefit other areas of Hoboken.

On Aug. 14, the Hudson River was at high tide twice during the heavy rains.

It’s not just closed streets and stuck cars that keep the city busy, but emergency responders and the Department of Environmental Services must participate in the cleanup.

“We’re trying to have the departments clean as much as they can and then the Hoboken Fire Department will hose [the affected areas] down,” Zimmer said. Zimmer thanked the NHSA and city employees in an interview last week.

Some residents have even called *The Reporter* about flooding that forced them to move out of their homes temporarily, but they did not wish to take their situations public yet.

Wolff said in his memo that other projects for the NHSA include a “thorough overhaul and relining of almost the entire Hoboken collection system” and an “analysis of the impact of the pump station.”

“The total amount invested by the Authority in the rehabilitation of the Hoboken system has, to date, been approximately \$40 million,” according to Wolff’s report.

The NHSA, as well as the residents of Hoboken, are looking forward to what hopefully will be a drier 2012.

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