

# State of emergency in Highland Park, Michigan after water system failure

**Lawrence Porter, Bryan Dyne**  
**4 January 2011**

The 17,000 residents of Highland Park, a city surrounded by Detroit, lost running water over the New Year's weekend. This was the second metro Detroit city within a week forced to institute a state of emergency due to infrastructure degeneration, following the massive natural gas explosion that killed two people December 30 in the city of Wayne.

In the early afternoon of Friday, New Year's Eve, a key water pump failed in the Highland Park treatment system. This triggered the backup system, which draws from nearby Lake St. Clair. The inundation of water into the Highland Park system caused a massive rupture, leading to the loss of water pressure throughout the city. Residents were left without water for cooking, cleaning or flushing toilets. Those with water boiler systems lost their heat during the frigid temperatures. Fire hydrants were also affected.

When the crisis hit, residents flooded the fire department with requests for bottled water. The overwhelmed fire department could only provide water to a section of the population, focusing primarily on the elderly and the home-ridden, leaving the majority of the population to fend for itself.

Spontaneous protests erupted in front of the city hall Friday afternoon, as residents became aware of the lack of water. The city's mayor, Hubert Yopp, issued a statement later that day that service had been restored, but that water pressure was lower than usual. Yopp also issued a "boil water alert," warning residents that the water could be contaminated.

It was not until Saturday that the water pressure finally returned. Nevertheless, Wayne County

Executive Robert Ficano declared a state of emergency in the city because the water contamination posed a danger to residents.

By Sunday, city and school officials decided to close the public schools the next day to avoid health concerns from the boil water advisory. About 1,200 students in grades K-12 were affected by the decision, forcing parents to scramble for sitters for their children.

Less than a week ago, another state of emergency occurred in the largely working class city of Wayne, also in Wayne County. An aging gas pipe exploded under a furniture store, killing two people and severely injuring the storeowner. Residents in the area reported the smell of gas to the utility company three hours before the explosion. A second leak was discovered in the same area after the explosion, but was successfully capped before exploding.

The crumbling infrastructure throughout the Detroit area is becoming increasingly dangerous to the population. Mayor Yopp acknowledged this, saying, "We need help replacing our old infrastructure to upgrade our system."

Christopher Woodard, a Highland Park councilman, told the WSWs that Henry Ford created the water pipeline at the turn of the 20th Century to provide water to one of Ford's automobile plants. The water system is in dire need of updating, stated Woodard, but no money was available. "The system has a lot of needs," said Woodard. "It has not been maintained the way it should, and because of the costs, the city does not have the funds to make improvements."

Unlike the majority of communities in southeast Michigan that receive their water from Detroit, Highland Park maintains its own water filtration and distribution system.

A lack of communication about the nature of the crisis has frustrated many residents of the area. Brandon Webb, a student at Oakland University, said that he hadn't received any information. "I'm thirsty, I've had no shower, and the water might be unsanitary," Webb said. "No phone calls, nothing. I heard about it New Year's Eve night, and the next morning, the water was messed up."

Thomas Guthrie, 19, had no water. "They said water would be back on today. It's not." Guthrie continued, "I can't cook, can't clean. I go to the liquor store across the street for a bathroom." Guthrie also described the reactions of his four housemates. "Tensions are running high. It's no good all around."

Johnnie Green, a cook, echoed the sentiments of Webb and Guthrie. "I found out at work that there was no water pressure. When it came back, it looked powdery, and the pressure was low. A neighbor said his pressure was down too. I have a 43-year-old handicapped daughter to take care of. How can I do that without water?" Green was forced to buy water at a local CVS in order to flush the toilets.

She was also upset at the lack of information. "People are in danger," Green said. "There's not enough information about what's going on." In regards to the distribution of bottled water, Green said, "I didn't see any bottled water. I saw it on the news, but I didn't get any."

Green also touched on some of the broader issues surrounding the pump failure. "We've had years of issues. Cost for water is very high, \$250 every three months. We also just had a vote to keep the filtration plant public. Some company wants to buy it up, and charge us even more."

Highland Park was the home of the Model T Ford and the former headquarters for Chrysler Corporation. It is the city where Henry Ford first implemented the assembly line production method, revolutionizing the way production occurred on a global scale. In its heyday, like neighboring Detroit, it was one of the most important industrialized cities in the US.

In 2000, the state appointed a financial manager to take over the operations of the bankrupt city, effectively supplanting elected city officials. Highland Park is now one of the most impoverished cities in America, with nearly 40 percent of the population below the poverty line.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**