

Storm brings widespread flooding to southeast Michigan

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A record amount of rain fell in southeast Michigan on Monday, overwhelming the area's aging infrastructure and flooding freeways, surface streets and homes. The average rainfall for the day exceeded 6 inches in some areas.

The amount of rain that fell on Monday was the second greatest in Detroit history. On average, Detroit received 4.57 inches of rain, as measured by the Detroit Metro Airport. This is topped only by rainfall which occurred on July 31, 1925, when an average of 4.74 inches was recorded. Southfield and Dearborn reported rain well above the average, at 6.25 and 6.31 inches respectively.

The following day, sections of major freeways, including Interstate 94, Interstate 75 and Interstate 696, were shut down due to flooding. Michigan Department of Transportation spokesperson Diane Cross stated, in an interview with the *Detroit Free Press*, that the pumping systems used to keep water from piling up on roadways were "overwhelmed" by the extent of the rain. Sections of these freeways remain closed and some places may remain closed for days, government officials stated.

Craig Covey, spokesman for Oakland County Water Resources Commissioner Jim Nash, stated that the rain popped manhole covers off in the city of Berkley, filled 108-inch sewer lines and that the George W. Kuhn Retention Treatment Basin in Madison Heights recorded its highest water levels ever.

Several sources reported that over 1,000 cars were abandoned on roads in the city of Warren alone. Numerous residents in the areas affected by the rains reported flooding in their basements and severe water damage to carpets and other possessions.

In addition to flooded basements, a total of 32,000 DTE Energy customers lost power during the course of the storm and in its aftermath. Though it was turned back on for many, as of Tuesday night 8,000 customers were still without power.

In addition to the property damage caused by the extensive rainfall, two deaths have been attributed to the storm. A 100-year-old woman living in the Detroit suburbs was found in her flooded condominium basement on Tuesday. Another woman in the same area died after she began to suffer seizures when her car became trapped in water. She was rushed to the hospital and was pronounced dead. In Warren, where both of the deaths occurred, the rainfall was even higher than the average for Detroit, at 5.2 inches over the course of the day.

The heavy rains on Monday were more than the sewer systems across metro Detroit area could handle, resulting in millions of gallons of untreated and partially treated sewage flowing into rivers and lakes. Officials at the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) were checking the water for elevated *E. coli* levels. If higher than normal levels are found this could prompt beach closures and other public health measures.

In 2001, the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments estimated the region needed \$14 to \$26 billion in sewer upgrades by the year 2030. But with declining revenues, cities have cut services rather than provide much needed funding.

Some officials, including Craig Covey and Laura Verona of the DEQ, have claimed that the recent rains would have overwhelmed even an adequately funded infrastructure. This is contradicted by remarks made by Steve Liddle, a Detroit lawyer who specializes in sewage backup suits, to the *Detroit Free Press*. Liddle stated that many sewers in metro Detroit are separated, meaning that the household sewage and rainwater runoff are transported in separate pipes. In those cases, a heavy rain should not cause sanitary sewers to back up. Liddle blamed poor maintenance and design for the problems.

A report published by the U.S. Global Change Research Program earlier this year, entitled "Climate Change Impacts in the United States" noted, "Across most of the

United States, the heaviest rainfall events have become heavier and more frequent. The amount of rain falling on the heaviest rain days has also increased over the past few decades. Since 1991, the amount of rain falling in very heavy precipitation events has been significantly above average. This increase has been greatest in the Northeast, Midwest, and upper Great Plains—more than 30 percent above the 1901–1960 average. There has also been an increase in flooding events in the Midwest and Northeast where the largest increases in heavy rain amounts have occurred.”

As part of its coverage of the record-breaking rain the WSWS interviewed several workers and residents in the Detroit suburb of Royal Oak who were impacted by the storm.

John Burdridge came out of his house and admitted that his yard looked like it was part of Hurricane Katrina. He said he was at work when he heard that the basement was flooding. “We have always had issues when there was a heavy rainfall. The basement leaks. But this time, my wife called to say the toilet was overflowing, the sink was overflowing and that you needed to get home.”

John said he risked life and limb to get home as soon as he could. When he got home he said he tried to reach someone to stop the flooding. “I tried using my cell phone to call plumbers. That didn’t help. The water just kept coming in and in. I called 911 and it was backed up. I couldn’t get hold if anybody. Finally I got the toilet unplugged. I don’t know how I did that. And got the sink... but the biggest problem was in the laundry room.”

Sue Cahill said: “This is not just a problem in Detroit, we are all on Detroit water. So the whole system is a mess.”

Sue said she was lucky, with only a few inches of water in her basement, but her neighbor had water as high as 4 feet. “His clean out top—we all have clean outs that take the water to the main drain for the storm water—it blew the top off the clean out and it was coming out four feet high like a geyser.

“All of us have clean outs in the basement and none of us can do anything about the water coming out of it. Mine was only 7 inches, but other people on the block also had clean outs that went four feet high in the air.”

When asked why she thought this happened, Sue said, “It’s a neglected system. We got lucky for a long time. But apparently, because the power went out, the pump that normally would clear out the area around the 696 and I-75 freeways did not work. So clearly there is no backup system on that, which it seems like there should be.

That’s why they pulled 36 cars out of 15 feet of water.

“I imagine that if that pump isn’t working it puts more of a strain on all of our storm drains. And that’s why it came up so fast. In five minutes I could see several inches of water. It was just like that.

“It is not a fabulous system,” continued Sue, “and the Vactor was just in our neighborhood last week cleaning out our drainage systems. So clearly it was not a matter of the (material in the) drainage system.”

Sue is a seamstress who works out of her basement. “I got a lot of things out quickly. I’m OK but a lot of my neighbors lost a lot.”

Sue said that a friend of hers working in the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department said you would be surprised that the system works at all. “Someone was saying is the city responsible for this?”

“And look at the water shut offs. Look at where some of the largest non-payments come from? The corporations. They are going to cut off some old lady for \$500 when Comerica Park owes tens of thousands of dollars. It’s crazy, and they are going after the little people, as usual.”

Jacob Gray, Jason and Sammy are young workers who share a house. Jason said he was on his way to the gym when he nearly became stuck in rising water on the freeway. “I was on 696 at about 6:15pm. It was stop and go. I thought it might be because of the rain or an accident. When I saw the water I could see that it was all the way across the road. Cars were just trying to get up the courage to go across because there was no shallow way to get across. I could see that water was coming out of the sewer system and I realized it is going to get deeper before it gets better, and that if I am going to go I had better go now or it is just going to flood me out.”

When asked why the flooding happened, Jason said: “I’m not qualified to say but it appears the pumping system could not keep up with the rain. I heard it rumored that the Warren pump system was down but I don’t know if that was true or not.”



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