

# Sinkhole in Detroit suburb highlights decay of US infrastructure

A WSWWS reporting team  
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A massive sinkhole caused by a sewer line rupture in the northern Detroit suburb of Fraser, Michigan has forced the indefinite evacuation of at least 22 homes and closed 15 Mile Road, a major east-west thoroughfare.

The 100-foot-long, 250-foot-wide sinkhole appeared on Christmas Eve. Some homeowners who were evacuated were told they could return to collect possessions, but were barred from living in their residences.

The line rupture sent raw, untreated sewage flowing into the nearby Clinton River. A gas main, a water main and sanitary sewer tank were all impacted by the rupture and forced the shutoff of utilities to the area.

Damage assessment and repairs are expected to take at least a month. Repair crews are currently working around the clock in an attempt to stabilize the situation.

The disaster is a further expression of the decrepit state of US water infrastructure, demonstrated most acutely by the lead-in-water crisis in Flint, Michigan, in which as many as 100,000 residents were poisoned by lead-tainted water. The same week the sinkhole opened outside of Detroit, a large sinkhole in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, forced the evacuation of several homes.

It is not the first time that there have been problems with sewer lines in the Fraser area. At least four times in the last 35 years sewer pipes failed in the area, although they are supposedly designed to last 50 years. Another large sinkhole opened up near the current disaster site as recently as 2004.

National sewer infrastructure experts contacted by the *Detroit Free Press* said that multiple line failures involving relatively new pipes indicated poor construction, poor maintenance or poor engineering. The last inspection of the sewer line that failed last weekend was in 2009.

After a similar rupture in the area in 1980, an engineering firm recommended annual inspections be carried out on the sewer line until no changes occurred and that subsequent inspections happen at least once every three years.

A retiree and longtime resident of the area, Bob, who wished his real name withheld, told the WSWWS, “They should have been inspected. Apparently the sewer was maintained by Macomb County, which took it over from Detroit. Someone should have known this was going to happen, things like this don’t just happen overnight.”

Residents in the area have been given little information by local and state officials. Outgoing Macomb County Drain Commissioner Anthony Marrocco, a Democrat, whose office has jurisdiction over the failed sewer line, has been almost entirely unreachable during the crisis.

Owners of the home closest to the sinkhole have been told that the structure could be lost. Two more homes are at immediate risk of destruction.

Bob noted that the land on the other side of 15 Mile Road where the rupture occurred was previously a swamp. “The developers buy the property dirt cheap. People then build, not knowing that it was swampland previously.”

The sewer lines in the area move wastewater from 830,000 Macomb County residents to the giant Detroit wastewater treatment plant. In 2009, Macomb and Oakland counties in the north Detroit suburbs took over management of their respective sewer lines from the city of Detroit. They created a joint entity called the Oakland-Macomb Interceptor Drainage Control District. The 2004 collapse had revealed that several miles of sewer lines needed significant and costly repairs.

According to a report in the *Detroit Free Press*, previous sewer line failures were the result of “piping,” where fine soil particles enter the line through cracks, eroding the ground supporting the sewer line, creating additional cracks and further aggravating the situation until a major rupture occurs.

The particular sewer line that collapsed, which runs along 15 Mile Road on the border between Clinton Township and Fraser, was caught up in the seedy and corrupt world of local Democratic Party politics. A 2011 lawsuit by Macomb County accused former Detroit Democratic Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, among other things, of stealing money from a repair fund created to deal with the 2004 sinkhole.

Meanwhile, it is not clear what official assistance evacuated residents are being offered. Laura, a home health worker and local resident whose house sits just outside the sinkhole area, told the WSWS that neighbors were pitching in to help embattled homeowners. “There is going to be a fundraiser at a restaurant on Tuesday. People are putting things on Facebook. The local community is stepping up.”

Bob said, “The first five days we did not get any feedback. We were left on our own. They didn’t contact the residents. This being a senior living facility, the residents here get rattled easily.”

A report drawn up by the state of Michigan and released earlier this month documents the failure of successive state administrations, Republican and Democrat, to address the decaying infrastructure throughout Michigan.

According to its findings, Michigan had a \$60 billion infrastructure gap over the last 20 years and an annual investment gap of \$4 billion, leaving infrastructure “in a state of disrepair.” Approximately 39 percent of the state’s roads are in poor condition, and 27 percent of bridges are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete.

In terms of water infrastructure, the report noted that 64 rivers that drain 84 percent of Michigan’s Lower Peninsula tested positive for human sewage. Since 2008, an average of 5.7 billion gallons of untreated sewage flowed into Michigan waterways.

When asked his thoughts on the lack of funding for infrastructure, Bob remarked, “All the money is going to support different wars all over the world. We are the most warring country on earth. Is all that really helping

people?”



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