

One year after devastating metro Detroit flooding, Great Lakes Water Authority rejects all damage claims

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On July 19, the Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA) announced that it is denying all 24,000 claims submitted following the devastating June 2021 flooding in metro Detroit, which hit the city of Dearborn especially hard.

The press release cites two specific factors as the grounds for evading responsibility. The first is a report on the findings of an “independent investigation” conducted by the GLWA with two third-party companies it hired; the second is the Michigan Governmental Liability for Negligence Act.

To the first excuse: the report itself is a cover-up for the GLWA. Released on June 20, one year after the historic floods, it explains that AECOM Technical Services and Applied Science, Inc. were hired to conduct the “independent investigation” into the flood. These companies produced a report which was given to the GLWA in December 2021. According to the GLWA, “The findings of both the internal and external investigations were essentially the same; therefore, the BoD [Board of Directors] directed the investigations to collaborate and develop a single Final Report,” which is located here.

As to the second excuse: according to the Governmental Liability for Negligence Act, public entities are only liable for sewage disposal system events if a defect in its sewage disposal system was 50 percent or more of the cause of damage and/or injury.

The logic in both arguments is that even if there had not been power outages which led to the failure of pumping stations, the amount of rainfall would still have overwhelmed the plumbing infrastructure, therefore, the GLWA is not responsible.

This is a continuation of the GLWA’s denial of

responsibility for any damages. Former GLWA Chief Executive Officer Sue McCormick, who stepped down shortly after the 2021 floods, told the press last year that pump stations had “operated as designed” during the storm, which is to say, not at all.

GLWA officials continue to state that any rainfall over 1.7 inches per hour will lead to “unavoidable flooding.” The “once-in-a-lifetime” downpours have now occurred twice in the span of under a decade. Historic rainfall hit the area June 25-26 and again on July 21, 2021. Similar flooding took place in 2014 and many residents who were impacted had not fully recovered from the previous disaster. Just three weeks prior to the release of the report on the June 2021 disaster, a flood warning was issued again in Dearborn in case of “excessive rainfall.”

In early June, the Dearborn City Council, under newly elected Mayor Abdullah H. Hammoud, voted 6-1 to approve a \$128 million budget for the city. The new budget eliminated a \$22 million deficit by “restructuring” \$6.4 million in health care benefits for retirees, ostensibly so that the city could afford to launch a study into the water and infrastructure system to “mitigate” such disasters in the future.

“If we get the same rain tomorrow, we’re going to have widespread flooding,” GLWA CEO Suzanne Coffey said last month. “I would love to be able to assure you that wouldn’t happen, but the conclusion here is no system could handle this kind of rain.” Coffey was named interim CEO following the departure of Susan McCormick in the wake of the disaster last summer.

In an official statement to local 7 Action News, Coffey wrote: “We understand the difficult situations

homeowners and businesses face when flooding occurs. The unprecedented rain events of last summer are a real-life example of the devastating impacts that climate change can have on our communities. We will likely continue to see more intense storms and while it is not possible to eliminate the chance of flooding, we are taking actions that can help mitigate the extent of the flooding.”

While climate change is a major factor in disrupting, changing or exacerbating existing weather patterns, the fault lies with the abject failure of the city’s crumbling infrastructure. A report from the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) last summer indicated that at least 28 freeway pump stations either had communications problems as a direct result of massive power outages throughout the region, or experienced mechanical issues due to the heavy rainfall. On the city’s east side, only three out of the 16 total pump stations were operating in any capacity during the floods—again, a direct result of the power outages.

These pump failures caused intense flooding on major freeways in the metro Detroit area, and damaged or destroyed thousands of vehicles and homes. DTE, metro Detroit’s energy giant, has also not been held accountable for the outages which wreaked so much havoc on the area. The Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) released a perfunctory statement to a local news station after the GLWA announcement. “While the Great Lakes Water Authority has made their determination on claims related to the June 25-26, and July 16, 2021 rain events, the sewer backup claims submitted to the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department remain under review.”

Most residents collected little to nothing from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which was called in after the extent of the damage became clear. Some residents have received paltry checks that come tens of thousands of dollars short of actual damages, and many are stuck in endless calls between federal, state and local government agencies passing the buck. Approximately 70,000 applied for assistance at a temporary Disaster Relief Center.

Residents were told in the immediate aftermath to hold off on removing water- and sewer-damaged sections of their property until FEMA and insurance representatives could arrive to assess the damage. However, with nowhere else to go, the mold and

bacteria became a major health concern and many of the flood victims tore out and threw away their destroyed property, worried that this would be cited as grounds for rejecting claims.

A class action lawsuit has been filed by over 600 residents against the GLWA and DWSD.



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