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Months after flood, some fear more rain

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While most Westchester residents have their lives back to normal after April's historic downpour, hundreds still have not.

They're people like Catherine Mauro, whose Yonkers co-op by the Sprain Brook is still running on two large generators parked outside the building.

Or Darlene Green in Mamaroneck, who watched the Mamaroneck River rise up and force its way into her home. Habitat for Humanity of Westchester has nearly finished rebuilding Green's place on Howard Avenue, but she needs new furniture; her towels are stacked on a folding chair by her bed.

These residents didn't just suffer when 7.48 inches of rain fell on April 15 and 16. They live constantly in fear of heavy rains, stricken by a flooding problem that has plagued the county for more than a century.

"We sit with bated breath every time we hear of heavy downpours, and we really don't think that anybody should have to live with that," Mauro said.

Today, 200 government planners and elected officials will meet at the Westchester County Center in White Plains to discuss how to finally tackle the problem. County Planning Commissioner Gerard Mulligan said he wants planners, public works superintendents and elected officials to attend.

"It's not to point fingers," he said. "It's just to say if we're going to work together going forward, they are the critical component."

County planners have dusted off a 1945 study suggesting solutions to what was a longstanding and worsening problem even then. That study, written by the county's then-commissioner of public works, James Harding, references an even earlier 1896 report on flooding problems.

Planners are looking at the Harding study, plus ones conducted by the Army Corps of Engineers in the 1970s, as they search for solutions, Mulligan said.

The summit, from 8:30 a.m. to 1 p.m., is open to the public, but Mulligan stressed that it is intended to be a work session, and is not a venue for residents to complain about their particular situation. No microphone will be set up for public comment, he said.

FEMA deadline

Monday is the deadline for victims of the April flood to apply for aid from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

People may register for the aid by calling 800-621-3362 or, for TTY hearing and speech impaired, 800-462-7585, from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. People also can register at www.fema.gov.

More than 7,900 people have registered for aid statewide, with the majority of those from Westchester, FEMA spokeswoman Anita Westervelt said.

So far, \$30 million in assistance has been given to New Yorkers, both in grants and low interest Small Business Administration loans, she said.

Westchester residents have received \$19.4 million of that aid, she said.

Flood victims who miss the deadline may still apply but must state in writing a reason they for not applying on time.

To address flooding, the Corps of Engineers undertook four projects along the Saw Mill River - two in Yonkers and one each in Ardsley and Chappaqua - erecting flood walls and rebuilding bridges to let water flow more freely. But other projects never came to fruition, including one to divert the Sheldrake River into a tunnel that would empty into the west basin of Mamaroneck Harbor to keep it from joining with the Mamaroneck River.

In the 1970s, the Corps of Engineers recommended a flood wall behind the Winchester co-operative on Palmer Road in Yonkers, where Mauro lives. The wall was never built, and Mauro's photos of the April flood show water rushing forcefully over the bank where the wall would have been.

County Executive Andrew Spano suggested in a news release announcing the summit that global warming bears some of the blame for worsening floods. Others have blamed the march of development, which covers ground with roads and buildings, allowing less area for water to soak into the earth.

The World War II-era Harding report said even then that development was making flooding problems worse, noting the "construction of paved roads, sidewalks, buildings, etc., is one of the principal causes of flooding."

Since then, the county population has grown to almost 1 million from about 600,000.

The nearly 8 inches of rain that fell in April gathered as it flowed downhill throughout the county until it raised the Mamaroneck River and Sprain Brook more than 10 feet apiece.

"This time, the water came so fierce and so quickly that it literally pulled my basement door off the frame and pushed it to the other side of the basement," said Mary Lou Greco, who has lived for 30 years on Center Avenue in Mamaroneck. "I really didn't want to leave the house, but once the door was knocked off the frame, I really had no choice."

On Howard Street, the river rose into the first levels of homes that are raised several feet off the street, like Green's.

"It was a total disaster, if you want to know the truth," said the retired supermarket senior cashier, who is less than two years away from paying off a 30-year mortgage on her property.

Now the cleanup effort is running into another problem: mold.

"It starts growing 24 hours after the damage, and now we are in our eighth week, and it's posing grave health issues," said David Currie, executive director of United Way, which has joined with other organizations to deal with flooding problems.

Dwayne Monaco, owner of Northeast Environmental Inc. in Mamaroneck, which remediates mold problems, said his company was hired for four preventative cleanups after the flooding.

Monaco said mold remediation should include removing gypsum wallboard and drying or removing anything else wet. "Minimal" mold can be fought by wiping down an area with a diluted bleach solution, but serious problems should be handled by a professional, he said.

The Westchester County Health Department offers information on tackling mold on a Web page at www.co.westchester.ny.us/health/Mold.htm.

Volunteer groups also are helping. AmeriCorps has helped rebuild 75 homes and will try to get to an additional 100, said Bryan Van Rees, a team leader for the organization's National Civilian Community Corps. Habitat for Humanity of Westchester has worked on 81 homes, said Jim Killoran, the organization's executive director.

Killoran expanded his group's mission Saturday, as about 50 volunteers pulled car parts, doors, trees and

other debris from the Mamaroneck River to help open its flow. He plans to make it a monthly activity.

Mauro said workers from her building, the Winchester, found 6 to 7 feet of silt that could be dredged in the Sprain Brook.

Red Cross of Westchester helped 380 people in the flooding's aftermath, housing many in a shelter at Mamaroneck High School. The organization served 10,000 meals and almost 5,000 snacks.

Mauro said the eyes of the residents will be on officials at the county meeting.

"We just could not fathom going through an experience like this again," she said. "And we should not have to."
