

Sewage Spill, Part II

Written by Mark Sell, BT Contributor
November 2017

Finger pointing begins after Griffing Boulevard leaks



Wendolyn West takes pride in her four-bedroom, three-bath waterfront house with the red barrel tile roof and magenta impatiens greeting visitors.

Trouble is, if she's not wearing a mask, she can't go inside.

West, 60 years old, bought the house in 1992 and most recently shared it with her 23-year-old son Vincent Spence, and her mother, who is 82 and ailing. As president of Urban Television Broadcasting, West teaches college classes in religion, ethics, and philosophy.

Thanks to the massive sewage spill during Hurricane Irma -- 56,500 gallons of it, according to a North Miami city engineering report -- West and her son are now living in a 31-foot Gulfstream trailer in her driveway at 13090 Griffing Blvd., for \$65 a day. The ooze backed up her toilets, crept into her bathtub, and could be lurking in the air-conditioning system.

It wasn't her first sewage spill, and it's not her only problem. According to another structural engineer, construction work on a county storm-water pump station just north of her has cracked the foundation of her house, putting the structure at risk.

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West might return to the house, or not. Her lawyer, Andrew Kassier of Coral Gables, says he is planning to sue the county, and perhaps the city.

West's example prompts questions: With repetitive events like infrastructure failures and flooding of low-lying areas, is every property worth saving? Is it better to let nature reclaim it than rebuild and create more trouble?

West is not alone. The Urban Land Institute's study of the low-lying Arch Creek Basin -- a 2838-acre zone extending from Biscayne Bay to West Dixie Highway and from north Miami Shores through Biscayne Park, unincorporated Miami-Dade County, much of North Miami, and a bit of North Miami Beach -- suggests buying back and reclaiming a growing number properties subject to repetitive flooding. While West is in a FEMA flood zone, the sewage issue eclipses flooding problems, for now.

Last month this column told the story of Laura Hill across the street ("[Sewage, Sewage Everywhere](#)"). Hill's family returned home after massive decontamination and 11 days without power.

West's ordeal is more complicated. Hers is a tale of failed infrastructure, governmental confusion, vulnerability to the elements, individual kindnesses, and ironies fit for Kafka, with profound consequences for her family, her business, and her finances.

Says West: "We have a 3000-square-foot house but cannot use it because it is contaminated. So we're squeezed into this 50-square-foot trailer. We've been vandalized three times, and I've lost most of the cameras, tripods, and computers that I need for my business. Code enforcement has come and said that I am in violation with the RV in front. Well, they violated me pretty bad."

So what happened? How? And why?

The manhole in front of the house first popped and spread sewage back in 2006. The City of North Miami dealt with the problem and cleaned up the mess. A few years later it happened

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again, and the pattern accelerated to every few years. After one such event last year, West noticed that she was having trouble breathing and started using a respirator. Son Vincent has swollen glands on either side of his throat.

“Our family doctor said we’ll continue to have these problems as long as we live in that house,” West says.

Irma proved the breaking point. The manhole blew open Saturday, September 9, with clear skies, no rain, and full power. The gushing accelerated and continued through the wind, the storm, and blackout. Once Irma passed, West and Spence drove to the city, and utility coordinator Anthony Martin drove up and ushered West’s mother and aunt to her car. Interim Police Chief Larry Juriga paid for two nights’ lodgings with his credit card at the Beachwalk Hotel at Hallandale Beach Boulevard so they could get their bearings.

FEMA put them up at Hilton hotels for seven days, during which West’s mother fainted and was hospitalized, and then her sister came down from Albany, Georgia, to take the mother home with her.

West and her son returned to a rented trailer, vandalized home, and a new, post-Irma life.

How all this happened has been in dispute. The city engineer initially traced the source to a power failure at Miami-Dade Water and Sewer Department Pump Station 346 at 13760 NE 5th Ave., less than a mile away from West’s home.

The county says the facts prove otherwise, citing documents that the station did not lose power before, during, or after Hurricane Irma. Further, the county emphasizes that the station received a big upgrade in July 2012 and is one of about 190 sewer pump stations of more than 1000 countywide with a permanent backup generator.

The county traces the more likely source to City of North Miami sewer feeder pipes that route to the pump station.

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“When there is a combination of high ground water and surface water levels, infiltration of these waters into the sewer pipes then surcharges the pump station’s capacity, which is not meant to handle these higher-than-normal volumes,” the county says in a statement responding to a *BT* inquiry. “However, we have no data that there were any overflows from this sanitary pump station.”

Miami-Dade’s sewer system is a well-documented mess. The county is four years into a \$13 billion capital improvement program, inspired partly by a 2013 consent decree with the Environmental Protection Agency.

Are city systems like North Miami’s any better?

The answer hardly reassures. North Miami issued a four-day boil water order after Irma as a result of four broken water lines. With aging lines in North Miami and adjacent municipalities, north Biscayne Bay swimming advisories resulting from sewer pipe ruptures have become bimonthly or quarterly affairs. On October 6, the manhole in front of West’s house blew open yet again.

Deeper dysfunctions persist, too, despite North Miami employees’ heroic efforts. The city still reels from an epic foul-up in getting customers their water bills as much as a year late, and from the loss of institutional knowledge caused by mass departures of civil service staff, early pension buyouts in 2013-2014, patronage hiring, and revolving-door management. A 60-page state forensic audit draft released in late October lays out a damning picture of fiscal, pension, and hiring practices that the city is now working to address.

Is it any wonder that the city runs into a buzzsaw from the public in selling a \$135 million bond issue for public facilities, technology, and infrastructure?

At least infrastructure is a good place to start. Just as the finest house cannot withstand a leaky roof, a community and its natural surroundings cannot thrive with burst pipes.

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