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Jefferson Chalmers residents sink Detroit proposal to close two canals



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Detroit — Residents of Jefferson Chalmers raised such a fuss Tuesday night over a City of Detroit suggestion to shut two canals in this eastside community that on Wednesday city officials decided to sink the idea.

City officials told residents that the permanent closure of Fox Creek and Philip Street canals was one of two options the city was exploring in its ongoing efforts to halt flooding and infrastructure challenges in the lower eastside community.

The suggestion sparked immediate resistance. Social media video of the meeting shows virtually every resident in attendance rising to their feet, many chanting “Don’t close the canals.” A website called SaveTheCanals.com was formed.

“People were mad. They were screaming at the podium,” said Andy Didorosi, a Jefferson Chalmers resident who attended the Tuesday night meeting at Hope Community Church, 14456 E. Jefferson Ave.

The city will no longer pursue the idea of closing the two canals.

"We heard the residents loud and clear. We are not going to look at that option," said Tyrone Clifton, director of the Detroit Building Authority and one of the city officials who spoke to residents at the Tuesday meeting. "The community was strongly against it, and we should listen to the community."

Instead, the city will continue to explore the idea of repairing seawalls on 17 parcels of city-owned waterfront property. In addition, the city will consider creating a "major fine/litigation strategy" to enforce strict seawall compliance by property owners. That, too, has already raised some pushback by residents.

Jefferson Chalmers on the lower eastside boasts more than 160 acres of waterfront parks, boat launches, fishing access and outdoor recreation opportunities, according to the City of Detroit website page about the community. Part of the community includes the Canal District, which is sometimes called "The Venice of Detroit." It includes the communities of Fox Creek, Harbor Island and Klenk Island. Some homes line a series of canals from the Detroit River almost to Jefferson Avenue.

Clearly, the canals are part of this eastside's community identity. But now due to more flooding, sewage backups and inadequate seawalls, the city needs to find a way to protect the neighborhood from further damage. Tuesday's meeting was just one in a series of public dialogues, federal studies and other actions.

City officials presented two options to residents Tuesday night, according to a copy of the presentation provided by the city. One option was to create a "major fine/litigation strategy" toward property owners to ensure they are maintaining secure seawalls on their properties. According to the document, 43% of property owners on the water have deficient seawalls.

Last year, after summer flooding, more residences near the Detroit River canals were designated a "Special Flood Hazard Area" by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). That designation makes it much harder for the city to get federal grants for the community because it is considered to be at risk for future damage, city officials have said in the past. It often means homeowners need to buy pricey flood insurance.

Wednesday's meeting is one in series of public discussions about the canals and how to improve the infrastructure to prevent more damage. Next week, the city holds another meeting that deals with how Jefferson Chalmers and the canals can benefit from a \$57.5 million grant from the Community Development Block Grant-Disaster Recovery. The fund is intended to help Detroit residents recover from the June 25-26, 2021 floods and to build resilient systems and infrastructure to combat climate change.

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