

► COMMENTARY

Cooperation — and money — can solve water problem in Jefferson-Chalmers

As we pass the anniversary of last year's late June disastrous storm and flooding, we're weary from the absence of a clear, comprehensive approach to solving the Jefferson-Chalmers community's interconnected water resource challenges, even though incremental efforts are underway by various organizations.

At the same time, how is it that the community most impacted by last year's storm and flooding and recognized nationally for its challenges has not received any direct appropriations from Congress or the state Legislature?

For a model on how cooperation might work, you need look only a little to the west to the Rouge River watershed.

The Rouge River Wet Weather Demonstration Project and the Alliance of Rouge Communities show what an organization and resources can do to effect measurable, remarkable and regional change and improvement across municipal boundaries.

The Rouge Project covers a watershed of 466 square miles, 48 communities and 1.4 million residents in parts of Oakland, Wayne and Washtenaw counties from Detroit to Novi to Salem. While the focus of the



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Rouge Project was pollution, the unprecedented cooperation across municipal lines turned a river most considered dead into a robust source for kayakers to fishermen as 75 organizations have secured nearly a half-billion dollars in investment from government and foundations for combined sewer overflow and stormwater control projects, stream restoration, removal of tons of PCBs and the restocking of more than 30,000 fish.

The Rouge Project was born on a Friday afternoon when John Dingell's chief of staff asked what resources would be needed and on Monday, a direct appropriation was headed to metro Detroit. While the public sector was the conduit for initial resources, the non-profit alliance continues to play the leadership role, and a decade after the Rouge Project began, the EPA in August 2002 said, "Rouge River Project is a Blueprint for Success."

Jefferson-Chalmers is bounded by Conner Avenue, the Detroit city limits, East Jefferson Avenue and the Detroit River. The Jefferson-Chalmers Water Access, Technology, Education, and Recreation Project (jeffersonchalmerswaterproject.org), that I proposed in a white paper pub-

lished just two days before the storm, provides a framework for organizing while identifying three goals: 1) Keep sewage out of basements and canals; 2) Keep stormwater out of the system; and 3) Keep the Great Lakes out of the neighborhood.

Achieving these goals will require a dedicated organization with professional staff. Neighborhoods like St. Anne's, Grandmont-Rosedale, Corktown and Midtown have flourished due to their organizations focused on their progress.

Comprehensive solutions developed in Jefferson-Chalmers will require significant and dedicated long-term resources, including appropriations at the city, state and federal levels, along with early and sustained support from the philanthropic community. The work will not only have ripple effects through the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department and the Great Lakes Water Authority, but can also serve as an international demonstration project for what a 21st century sustainable community should look like.

Jefferson-Chalmers residents are 88 percent African-American. A third live in poverty. Aged and failing infrastructure had an even greater impact as demonstrated last June confirmed by GLWA's independent report. "The event across the southern portions of the service area, particularly in the east, far exceeded designed capacity."

All three facilities that had failures the night of the storm highlighted by



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the investigation are on the east side, Freud sits within Jefferson-Chalmers and Conner is less than one block west. Great Lakes flooding along with greater-than-predicted, historically unprecedented and intense rainfall shows us the impact of climate change. Currently, lead service lines are being replaced.

Examining how water moves through the community will be critical in considering green alternatives to traditional gray infrastructure. Solutions will need to take into account and involve upstream neighbors, making it also multi-jurisdictional and beyond the purview of any one agency. DWSD; Detroit's Buildings, Safety Engineering, and Environmental Department; GLWA; Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy; the Army Corps of Engineers, etc. will all have roles to play — making it multi-departmental at every level of government across municipal boundaries.

Breaking down bureaucratic, programmatic, and funding silos to address the intersectionality of these challenges must be the cornerstone. Gary Brown's comment about GLWA's report should be lauded, but it's also important to note that for the \$2.75 million spent on the report, you could buy a mile of seawall along Fox Creek. And, while residents are organizing, they should be supported in those efforts with funding sources asking how they can help.

A Jefferson-Chalmers water project, similar in scope and scale to the Rouge restoration, is large enough so that any and every interested stakeholder — residents, businesses, elected officials, public agencies, nonprofits — can have a seat at the table, working in an unprecedented collaboration seeking solutions that will unlock economic opportunity. The experience with the Rouge suggests a model for how that can happen.