

Calumet area community leaders meet to address flooding issues



Molly Oshun, project manager for RainReady, a flood mitigation program run by the Center for Neighborhood Technology, chats with residents of Riverdale during an informational meeting last week. (Donna Vickroy) (Donna Vickroy / Daily Southtown)



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During heavy rains, Bobby Evans places pallets at the edge of his front yard in Dolton so children waiting for the school bus can board without having to wade through an unexpected river.

"One little boy, I used to have to pick him up to get him on the bus," Evans said.

Evans and his wife, Barbara, have lived at the property on 156th Street since 1985. Over the years, when it rains, the five acres or so of vacant land behind him, made up of forest preserve and [Illinois Department of Transportation](#) land, turns into a steady gush that spills over onto his property.

"The water starts at 154th Street out of the forest preserve and all of it channels around to the front of my house," Evans said. "It just runs like a river for three weeks."

Fortunately, the water doesn't get into his house, but it has devastated the area outside it, he said.

"It's taken my neighbor's street out," he said. "And it's hard for the kids waiting for the bus."

The Evanses joined other residents, community activists and village leaders from the Calumet Region at a daylong meeting Saturday at Thornton Fractional North High School in Calumet City to brainstorm ideas for addressing flooding in their towns. The gathering was arranged by RainReady, a project run by the Center for Neighborhood Technology, a 40-year-old organization made up of engineers, scientists and urban planners.

The low-lying Calumet region, which comprises Blue Island, Robbins, Riverdale, Dolton, Calumet Park and Calumet City, is particularly susceptible to ongoing flooding problems simply because of its topography and aging infrastructure, RainReady project manager Molly Oshun said.

Because responsibility can overlap boundaries and jurisdictions, and because no single agency has the financial means to completely solve flooding, RainReady calls on residents, village leaders, county officials and business owners to work together, Oshun said.

"Today, we're just taking in information and chatting about how some relief steps might apply," she said. "We're launching steering committees in the six communities where RainReady has been working in 2016."

The morning's session focused on three of the towns, the afternoon's on the other three.

"We've had some community meetings already in these towns and began to identify community leaders, people who care about this issue and who are willing to step up," she said.

In addition to identifying primary causes of flooding, which include a spike in the frequency of short duration, high intensity storms; disappearing permeable surfaces; and aging infrastructure, RainReady helps residents procure nature-based solutions and seek funds for costly undertakings.

When water flow isn't working, Oshun said, there are two options: Upsize the infrastructure or keep water out in the first place.

The meetings aimed to identify needs and potential solutions, as well as explain the process of paying for it.

"We're talking about how to organize your community and how to work with municipal partners, nonprofits, agencies and elected officials to generate investment to address the issue," Oshun said. "Also, we're doing some community visioning, forming steering committees that can work with the implementation of the RainReady plan. Just like we did in Midlothian."

Midlothian was the nation's first RainReady community resilience plan. That town's ongoing flooding has been caused by the over banking of two creeks. At CNT's recommendation and with money from federal grants and the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District, work has been underway to add a detention pond, widen culverts and clear Natalie Creek of sewer-blocking debris.

The RainReady Midlothian Plan was recently named an Infrastructure Game Changer by the American Society of Civil Engineers. A rain garden that resident Helen Lekavich and her team of activists, who call themselves "Floodlothian" Midlothian, constructed outside of Grills' Hardware also received an honorable mention for Sustainable Landscaping from the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago.

Oshun said: "What we learned in Midlothian is that residents really have to be at the center of pushing for plan implementation. We are the technical experts. We're in a position to help with the analysis and understand the nature of the problem and make recommendations. But it's important that both our understanding of the risks and the solutions we recommend are really led by the people who are experiencing the challenges and live in the community."

Barbara McBee, who lives on 144th Street near Halsted in Riverdale, attended Saturday's meeting.

"I'm here because my neighbors flood, the drains flood and the viaduct floods," she said. "I know that my neighbors struggle. I have a neighbor on one side of me who has a small preschool. I watch his yard flood. The majority of water will find its way to my yard too."

McBee said she'd like to see the community add some greenspace, as well as more permeable surfaces and areas for dog walking.

"We've lost a lot of trees to the emerald ash borer," she said. "I would like to see a replanting."

More trees would help alleviate flooding and improve air quality, while enhancing the community, she said.

"Riverdale has been historically known as a tree city," she said. "It would be nice to get back to that."

Latonya Nalls and her mother own a four-unit building in Dolton.

"During the past two heavy rains we got at least two-and-a-half feet of water in our basement," Nalls said. "Whenever it rains, I'm afraid to leave the house."

She said she attended the meeting to get ideas for solutions.

"I have a sump pump and a back up, but what I didn't know was about the back flow," she said. "I'm gonna look into that. I like the idea of the greenspace and rain gardens, too."

Calvin Woods, of Riverdale, said flooding is just the tip of the iceberg in the Calumet Region.

"It's the whole economic engine in the south suburbs that needs addressing," he said.

The tax rate for businesses needs to be addressed as well, he said.

"I want to see that get better," he said.

Elizabeth Scott, chief of staff for Dolton Mayor Riley Rogers, also attended the meeting.

"I first came on board a little over a year ago after meeting the Evans family. They've experienced flooding for well over a decade. They've reached out to different administrations and nothing has been done," Scott said.

"I was really drawn in over their story about children getting on and off the school bus by using pallets," she said.

"I know a lot of the south suburbs are experience flooding. This is not an anomaly but this is something that is near and dear to this administration," she said.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, the Active Transportation Alliance and RainReady-CNT will co-host a pop-up event 11 a.m.-1:30 p.m. Saturday on 147th Street in Midlothian to demonstrate the look and feel of that town's proposed Complete Street project. For more information on RainReady, visit www.rainready.org

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