

Subdivision never flooded, until it did, and residents want answers

Cypress residents who once never worried of rising waters now live in fear

By **Mike Tolson** | June 11, 2016 | Updated: June 11, 2016 9:45pm



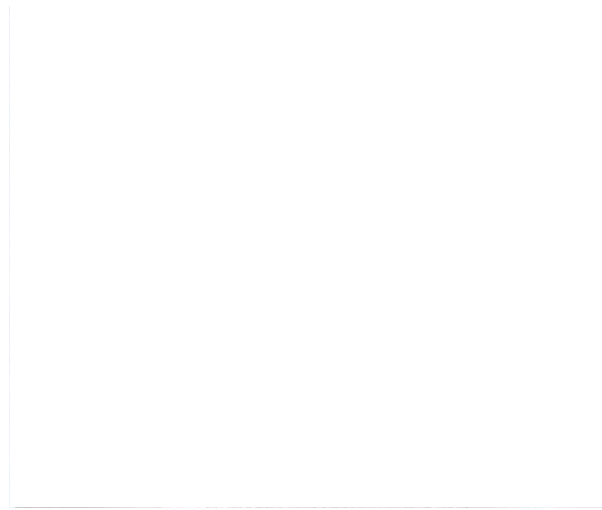
Photo: Mark Mulligan, Staff

IMAGE 1 OF 4

Greg Bowen's home in the Stable Gate subdivision off Telge Road in Cypress has been stripped to the drywall and of flooring after filling with water April 18, the first time the development ever flooded.

Third in a series

Something was wrong - that was obvious to everyone who looked at the flooded streets around them. For most of the morning, water had steadily flowed toward the creek behind the neighborhood, as it had done after countless other storms. Now it was going the other way. And rising.

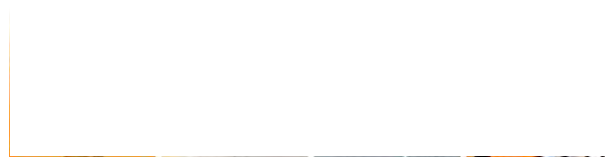


Hank Rennar stood on his corner lot in the Stable Gate subdivision in Cypress and knew they were in trouble. Neither Rennar nor his neighbors had seen anything like it. Cars parked at the bottom of driveways were doomed by the suddenly about-face muddy torrent.

A day that had begun with the promise of brighter skies and no more rain was about to turn into a frantic rush to shut off the power, find the family photos, move the antiques, locate the pets. Within the hour, Rennar was standing in water over his ankles. Down the street and across the way, some had it worse, with water rising to several feet. By the time the so-called Tax Day Flood was over, about 90 percent of the community's 250 or so homes had flooded.

Like residents across the western third of the county, those in Stable Gate view their lives - and the place they call home - a bit differently after the events of April 18. Occasional heavy rains may be a given in Greater Houston, flat and bathed in moist Gulf air, but to see widespread flooding in newer precincts, supposedly built to modern drainage standards and with keen awareness of geographic vulnerability, was shocking.

Angry flood victims pointed fingers at the generic "upstream," not buying official explanations of an unforeseeable, extreme rain event. For the first time, people were suspicious of the boomtown growth mania they had long taken for granted. Developers had cut corners, they insisted. And those charged with overseeing them must have just rubber-stamped their plans, they said.



Another twist of the knife came about five weeks later. On the Friday evening leading into Memorial Day weekend, the skies let loose once more. Cypress Creek flooded - again - and Little Cypress as well. A number of Stable Gate residents who were in the middle of repairs saw water return to their homes. So did some of the neighborhoods to the south.

Asking questions

The head of the Stable Gate homeowners association, Greg Bowen, summarized the fear that now pervades communities that previously had been preoccupied with traffic congestion and school taxes.

"You know something is wrong when sewage is coming out of your shower drain," Bowen said. "This is an ongoing condition. Unless the county does something, this will keep happening."

But what something?

"I have no idea," he said. "Until somebody steps up, all I can think of doing is to keep asking questions."

The answers, of course, likely will not satisfy him, his neighbors, or much of Harris County for that matter. They complain that phone

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calls to elected representatives and relevant agencies may yield expressions of sympathy but little more. If there is anything like a consensus among flood victims, it's that government at every level does not consider their problems a priority once the waters recede.



The trouble with living in a swamp: Houston floods

explained



Built 15 years ago, Stable Gate is a relatively small, modestly aspirational upper-middle-class neighborhood off Telge Road, home to a healthy contingent of baby boomers for whom the large, two-story homes represent a lifetime of hard work. For many of them, such as travel business owner Tina Hearn, it figured to be the last house they would own. Now they say they couldn't sell if they wanted to, certainly not for the appraised values, which typically exceed \$400,000.

"Everything I worked for in my whole life is in this house," said Hearn, whose home flooded a second time last month. "We moved here from Baytown because we were concerned about hurricanes. We never dreamed a rainstorm could come in and take it all away."

All it took was a single night of rain, pounding and relentless, for the entire Little Cypress Creek watershed to be overwhelmed. Massive rainfall upstream slowly made its way down the narrow floodway to the southeast, where the creek eventually connects with its bigger brother, Cypress Creek. As it did, water flowing into it from a variety of sources, including Stable Gate's pipes

and ditch, had no outlet. Seeking equilibrium, it spread out and in some cases pushed back in the direction from which it had come.

It's as simple as that, says the Harris County Flood Control District: too much rain. More, in fact, than the agency had ever recorded at any of its rain gauges in the Little Cypress watershed back to 1989, when it started keeping track.

"I know that's not what the residents want to hear," said Matt Zeve, chief operations officer for the agency and a drainage engineer by trade. "But our design criteria is the 100-year flood."

The record rainfall, which exceeded 15 inches in some places, was felt through much of west and northwest Harris County and surpassed even once-a-century expectations. The result was more than 7,000 flooded homes and plenty of stunned residents who never figured they had a water problem, only to spend the next few days ripping out waterlogged carpet and tearing out saturated drywall. Some of them were in so-called 100-year floodplains, some in 500.

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Part One: Losing Ground

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Part Two: The Trouble With Living in a Swamp

If one is looking at topography, then the south Texas coastal plain around Galveston Bay should never have become home to millions of people. Hot, flat, and at times malarial, much of greater Houston was close to uninhabitable 150 years ago. Herculean efforts were required to take it back from nature.

Today: A neighborhood in peril

Many residents of the Stable Gate subdivision in northwest Harris County consider it little-known gem, tucked away in the trees near Little Cypress Creek. And then the Tax Day flood changed everything.



Not all of the flood victims are ready to accept Zeve's simple explanation. Instead, they see the crazy quilt of the county's western development - booming for more than two decades - as the likelier culprit. In Stable Gate, the second storm convinced them that the combined effect of runoff from newer construction, including new highways, may not be fully understood.

"It is the freaking flood that keeps happening in Cypress," said Hearn, who said rising water got close to her home on two earlier occasions. "There is not enough retention and detention ponds around this area, and they keep building more and more concrete. Telge Road gets completely flooded when it rains hard. It never used to be."

'No rise' policy

Unlike Tax Day, the May deluge was not off the charts. According to a report compiled by the flood control district, rainfall amounts in the Little Cypress watershed, while far above normal, for the most part were well under 10 inches. That provided ammunition to Stable Gate residents who claim that something has changed over the years, whether because of the completion of a section of the Grand Parkway immediately to the north, or from the construction of newer subdivisions around them.

Zeve, however, insists development in the watershed should not make a difference. The district has a strict "no rise" policy, meaning developers cannot build in a way that pushes more water

TRANSLATOR

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into creeks and bayous than went there when the land was undeveloped. All construction plans are reviewed to make sure drainage elements are adequate to ensure that, he said.

While sympathetic to calls for new detention basins that could protect downstream residents, Zeve said there is nothing that can be done along the lower stretches of Little Cypress Creek because all the property adjacent to it is fully developed. Instead, he said, the flood control district is concentrating on the creek's upper reaches, where its "frontier program" calls for regional detention facilities to be built to keep storm runoff from rapidly entering the creek.

"We have no plans to modify or make changes to Little Cypress Creek," he said, pointing out that adjacent communities would vigorously fight any attempt to remove trees or deepen the channel even if the district wanted to.

As for Stable Gate, if water is intruding into the neighborhood because of inadequate drainage ditches along Telge Road or because of some feature belonging to a nearby subdivision, that is not the flood control district's responsibility, Zeve said. Its concern is limited to the water in the creeks and bayous and how development may affect that. His review of the neighborhood's original construction plans found nothing irregular, he said.

The head of the flood control district, Mike Talbott, has said that problems in some areas reflect engineering strategies made many decades ago. A comprehensive solution to ongoing flooding woes would require major building and widening projects as well as buyout programs, he said.

The current flood control system was not designed to handle the infrequent "monster" storm, he said. The consequence of not building in excess capacity, especially as growth intensified and density increased, was ever-more-expensive and damaging floods.

"A lot of engineering was done before people understood the risks," Talbott said, pointing

The image shows a screenshot of a social media post from the Houston Chronicle. At the top, there are two main images: one of a house partially submerged in water and another of a residential neighborhood completely flooded. Below these are four smaller thumbnails with captions: 'Swamped: Explore Houston's floodplains', 'Swamped: Get a look at Harris County subsidence', 'Swamped: Get a look at the different types of floods', and 'Special presentation: A Region Submerged'. The post includes the Houston Chronicle logo and handle @HoustonChron, the text 'First the rain. Then the floods. Why is this happening? Find out with our new series Swamped bit.ly/1WyJK8j', and the timestamp '7:27 PM - Jun 2, 2016'. At the bottom, there are two small numbers, 10 and 9.

to the countless residencies that sit uncomfortably close to floodways.

Re-engineering it to a higher standard might cost \$26 billion, he said.

Devising own solutions

In other words, nothing is going to change anytime soon. After the April floods, Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner appointed Steve Costello, a former city council member, as his flooding "czar." Costello acknowledged straightaway he had no idea what the job entailed or what authority, if any, he would have. With a background in residential development, the engineer by trade has said that a reflexive desire to blame new, upstream development, while understandable, fails to appreciate the complicated nature of storm runoff in a relatively flat environment.

As neighborhoods in Houston and surrounding areas are learning, it may be for the residents themselves to devise solutions. Stable Gate, for example, could deepen its drainage ditch, install gates to prevent water from flowing back through the storm drains, or build its own detention pond on 26 wooded acres it owns at the back of the neighborhood.

Explore Houston's floodplains

Type in an address and flick find to see if it's located in a floodplain. Mercer Botanic Gardens is located at 22306 Aldine Westfield Rd, Humble, TX 77338.

Disclaimer

The Harris County Flood Control District's Flood Education Mapping Tool is for general information purposes *only* and may not be suitable for legal, engineering or surveying purposes. The floodplains shown on this mapping tool are those delineated on the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) effective Flood Insurance Rate Map (FIRM or floodplain map) for Harris County that was adopted in 2007, as well as updates that have been made through a Letter of Map Revision (LOMR) since 2007. This mapping tool is not an effective FIRM. The effective FIRM is produced, maintained and published by FEMA and not by the Harris County Flood Control District. Please visit FEMA's Map Service Center at www.msc.fema.gov to view the effective FIRM for Harris County. **For an official floodplain determination, please contact an insurance agent or mortgage lender.**

This map is a representation and approximation of the relative location of geographic information, land marks and physical addresses.

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5 miles 10 km

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Environmental lawyer Charles Irvine, who frequently consults with neighborhoods on flooding matters, senses rising frustration across the area and foresees a likely increase of improvised solutions such as "decorative" garden walls that may serve as mini-levees when waters rise. He faults those in leadership, including the flood control district, for not embracing the need for a

more assertive approach to dealing with apparent weaknesses in the system, especially in those areas that recently have begun to flood but don't have a history of doing so.

"When you have 6 or 8 inches of rain, you cannot always use the excuse of excessive rain amounts," Irvine said. "What people want is honesty and transparency, not silence and willful blindness."

Irvine said the regulations imposed on new development need to be enhanced in light of more - and more intense - storm systems. Likewise the mandatory review of construction plans should be much more rigorous, he said. He said his own reviews of such plans have revealed shoddy data, dubious hydrological modeling, and countless simple and "horrific" mistakes that somehow never were corrected.

What Irvine argues for most vigorously is a change in attitude. He believes local residents are willing to pass bond projects and endorse stricter controls if the payoff is a significantly more robust system of flood control.

"Why is it unreasonable to spend \$10 billion on a flood control project when one flood alone causes \$5 billion in damage?" he said.

Ever fearful

In Stable Gate, homeowners are confused and ticked off. They sense that something has changed with respect to local drainage patterns, but unless they hire an engineering firm to analyze their problems, they are not likely to get answers beyond what they already know: Houston is flat; it can rain a lot; the watersheds cannot handle all the runoff.

Rennar and his wife, like most of his neighbors, are dealing with contractors on a daily basis as they try to get about \$50,000 worth of repairs completed. If they were confident it was a unique event, unlikely to be rivaled anytime soon, the unpleasantness would be easier to tolerate. But every time the skies get cloudy and it looks like rain, they wonder whether the repairs will have been made in vain.

Tucked away in the trees, close to trails that run along a creek that they believed rarely flooded in a serious way, Stable Gate residents had exactly what they wanted - reasonable solitude in an urban environment and a small community that actually felt like one, where neighbors were friendly and looked after each other.

Hearn, who had left her longtime Baytown home in search of security, said Stable Gate "just looked like home" as soon as she passed through the front gates. Rennar seconds her opinion, saying he thought it was a "perfect place" that offered an antidote to road congestion and urban hurly-burly.

"We thought we had discovered a little paradise," he said. "I guess not."

Mike Tolson

Sr. Reporter, Houston Chronicle

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