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# Editorial: Re-envision infrastructure in wake of historic rainfall

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By The Detroit Free Press Editorial Board

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Metro Detroit's sewers need billions in work, the ability for communities to pay for that work is limited, and thanks to climate change, it's likely to get worse.

That's the grim takeaway from Monday's historic rainfall — the second-heaviest single day of rainfall in Michigan's recorded history. Some 4.57 inches fell in a matter of hours, flooding basements and roadways, [overwhelming drains and pumps](#), damaging possessions, overturning cars and leaving tens of thousands without power.

What this should prompt is a broadscale recognition that our infrastructure needs to be re-envisioned, that we need to spend a lot more money repairing our region's crumbling underpinnings. And that we should prioritize alternate ways of managing storm water, like green and blue infrastructure, which offer

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cheaper ways of managing storm water overflows.

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Is that likely to happen? Consider the debate in Lansing over roads, which any Michigander would tell you are a significant problem. A roads funding package has bipartisan support, and it's been championed by Gov. Rick Snyder, yet lawmakers left Lansing earlier this year without making a deal.

So what hope for storm water management? We're not optimistic.

The scientific community is in **near-universal consensus** that the earth's climate is changing, and that humanity is contributing to that change. But lawmakers continue to squabble over what's become a highly politicized issue.

Monday's rainfall is called a "hundred-year storm," but Jeffrey Andresen, an associate professor of geography at Michigan State University who also serves as the state climatologist, says that for the last 50 years, heavy rain events have been happening more frequently across the Midwest. "It's not a large increase, but it's measurable," he said.

This has to be incorporated into any storm water management plan, Andresen said: "We're going to have to build our systems to be more resilient to basically cope with changing variability. Variability is a key, key issue for us as a society."

In 2001, a Southeast Michigan Council of Governments report estimated that sewer infrastructure in southeast Michigan would require an additional \$14 billion to \$26 billion in investment by 2030. That hasn't happened. Worse, counties, cities and townships have seen continual declines in revenue, as property values (and thus property tax collections) have dropped, and the state has cut revenue sharing. Cities have cut services across the board. Federal dollars that helped pay for the build out of the sewer system just don't exist anymore.

"One of the really, really big problems, in my estimation, is the state has cut back on the funding to local units of government," said Steven Wright, a professor in University of Michigan's Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering. "That has had a major effect on ability to invest and upgrade infrastructure systems."

Communities' ability to pay for storm water management systems is

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also constrained by a [Michigan Court of Appeals ruling](#) that bars local communities from collecting money for such purposes. It's possible for the state Legislature to change that.

Michigan should also invest more heavily in natural ways of managing storm water overflow, like planting trees or forests, adding more directed drainage, and retention ponds. Green and blue infrastructure are integrated into Detroit Future City, a far-looking land use plan for the city of Detroit.

Chris Dorle, with Detroit Future City, is working on a green infrastructure pilot project through the federally funded Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. While a traditional "gray infrastructure" sewerage project can cost billions, the project Dorle's working on will cost about \$2 million, a portion of which will be spent on installing green infrastructure on 30 to 50 vacant lots on Detroit's lower east side. Specialists from Lawrence Technological University will measure how well each technique works.

No realistic amount of maintenance and upgrade would have mitigated all of the impact of Monday's storm, but when sewers aren't adequately maintained, pumps are more likely to fail, drains are more likely to be overwhelmed, and equipment is more likely to be inadequate to meet the system's needs, exacerbating a storm's impact on residents. And the longer sewer infrastructure malfunctions, the more costly the impact when it fails. (Just ask residents whose homes were flooded Monday night — or the engineers who'll be charged with fixing flooded roadways.) If lawmakers are serious about ensuring that Michiganders are better protected from calamitous weather, there's a policy prescription available. If they're not, it's a good time to invest in buckets.

*Correction: A Detroit Future City pilot project that involves installing green infrastructure in Detroit will cost \$2 million. An earlier version of this editorial misstated that amount.*

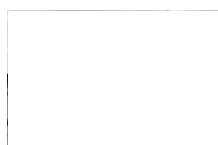
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