

Solutions, not Soundbytes.



Comprehensive flooding and drainage solutions

Noel Freeman's plan to reduce flooding and improve Houston's drainage infrastructure

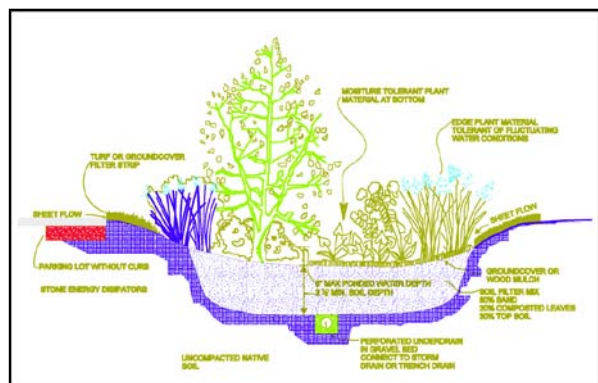
Houston is well known for frequent flooding and constant drainage problems. Following Tropical Storm Allison we learned it would take \$3 billion to bring our drainage infrastructure up to current standards, but we have failed to take a comprehensive and proactive approach to addressing flooding and drainage in some of our most frequently affected areas. Different parts of our city flood for different reasons and no single solution will solve all of our problems. As a five year employee of Houston's Public Works and Engineering Department and member of the Texas Floodplain Management Association, I know how to tackle our flooding and drainage problems and will take an aggressive approach to solving those problems.

★ Creating an Infrastructure Enterprise Fund

Since 2006 I have advocated for creation of a separate enterprise fund for our public infrastructure projects because there is more to our drainage system than just pipes and ditches. By creating such a fund we will lock in the funding for these projects that is currently at risk of being siphoned off for non-infrastructure projects. Additionally, we must take a city-wide approach to improving our infrastructure and prioritize projects on the basis of need and impact instead of location. Unlike the General Fund, taxpayers will know exactly how much of their tax dollars are paying for infrastructure. I have proposed increasing drainage improvements and maintenance funding to \$100 million by FY2013 and to \$150 million by FY2017. Protecting our existing funding is a good start toward that goal.

★ Local and Regional Detention Strategies

While Houstonians are always aware of repeat flooding associated with our bayous, many areas in Houston are prone to localized flooding because stormwater cannot drain to bayous and channels or because the areas were designed decades ago when drainage was not used as criteria in development. An effective solution is to work toward local and regional detention strategies in our neighborhoods. We have already begun to require detention for some new development, but we must consider



establishing detention in or near existing neighborhoods, particularly those neighborhoods that have begun experiencing localized flooding for the first time.

During heavy rain events, water can overload our stormwater system and cause it to back up, leading to localized flooding, even when our bayous and channels are significantly below flood stage. By creating detention areas that serve smaller areas within communities, the water can be kept out of homes and other structures while preventing an overload of our stormwater system. These detention areas can also serve as valuable parks and green space that improve quality of life.

“As a member of the Texas Floodplain Management Association and employee of Houston’s Public Works Department, I have the knowledge and skills to find real drainage solutions that get real results.”

- Noel Freeman

As Houston continues to develop, we have also seen an increased impact on drainage by smaller developments such as new homes that take up 80 to 90 percent of a lot where the previous structure covered only 25 to 50 percent. We can encourage on-site or underground detention on lots under the current threshold of 15,000 square feet by offering tax incentives to homeowners or developers to offset the cost of installing such detention. In most cases, underground detention can be constructed in ways that make it invisible to the average person and a very effective solution to small drainage issues that add up to major problems when multiple properties in a small area are redeveloped.

For communities near bayous and channels, including those in the regulatory floodplain and floodway, detention can be used as mitigation for development in the 1% (“100-year”) floodplain. Vacant lots in the regulatory floodway can be converted to detention and greenspace to help protect homes and create parks and greenspace on properties that cannot otherwise be developed.

★ Making the Comprehensive Drainage Plan Work

Our Comprehensive Drainage Plan (CDP) was developed in 2003, but has been hindered by a lack of adequate funding. Once a separate enterprise fund is established, I will work to retool the CDP in a way that addresses our most critical needs and anticipates future growth so our drainage projects can be designed to accommodate new growth. This may mean “overbuilding” our infrastructure so it can satisfy needs that exist in 10, 20 or more years. Investment in infrastructure is an investment in the future because the typical lifespan of our infrastructure is often several decades, and new products and technologies are increasing infrastructure life every day. By building to satisfy a future need, we can significantly reduce long-term costs. It is always less expensive to build now than to rebuild later. I will work to develop a long-term drainage plan that maximizes the lifespan and capacity of our drainage system.

★ Streamlining Neighborhood Street Reconstruction

Our streets are part of our drainage system, but we often fail to consider street reconstruction projects as drainage projects. As inconvenient as it may be when our streets flood, we all know it is better to have water in the street than in your house. Reconstruction of streets with open ditch drainage generally includes the installation of underground stormwater infrastructure and an overall lowering of the street height. In some cases, streets can be lowered by 18 inches to two feet, which creates a substantial amount of storage space for stormwater runoff and can help save homes from flood damage, but the wait for street reconstruction now averages eight years and includes a very time and labor intensive community petition process. I will work to streamline our Neighborhood Street Reconstruction Program to reduce wait times and will approach the program from a drainage perspective in many of our severely affected areas.

★ Aggressive Pursuit of Grants for Minor Improvements

For many citizens in Houston who have faced repeated flood damage, a simple project like raising their home six inches or other small-scale mitigation projects could mean the difference between a dry home and another devastating flooding disaster. Small improvements can be very inexpensive compared to the cost of recovering from a flood event, but are often unaffordable for low-income and elderly residents. Some of our most vulnerable communities have many residents who face a hardship in protecting their homes, and we can assist them in ways that improve their quality of life and protect property values. I will work with our Congressional delegation to bring more of our federal tax dollars back home to help protect our citizens from flood damage.

★ Reducing Flood Insurance Premiums

During my tenure with Houston's Public Works Department, we successfully improved our classification in the National Flood Insurance Program's Community Rating System three times. We went from a Class 8 to a Class 5, which means our citizens are paying \$10 million dollars less in flood insurance premiums than they were several years ago. This is unprecedented for a city of Houston's size, and I am very proud of our accomplishment. I will work to give our Public Works Department and Floodplain Management Office the tools they need to improve our rating to a Class 4 as quickly as possible. This will save Houstonians an additional \$1.5 million in flood insurance premiums. That is money we can put back in *your* pocket.

★ Buyout of Ineligible Properties

As part of an overall detention strategy and efforts to improve Houston's Community Rating, a portion of the drainage improvement budget should be used to purchase properties that have faced repeated flood losses but are otherwise ineligible for the federal buyout program. Vacant properties in the regulatory floodway that are prohibited from new development under our current ordinances are ineligible because



they do not contain structures that can be damaged, yet they face potentially devastating reductions in value because they cannot be developed due to restrictions in our floodplain ordinance. These properties should be included in a buyout program and can be used as mitigation or local detention projects. Once we are able to increase our drainage budget to \$100 million, I propose dedicating 5 to 10 percent of the drainage budget toward buyouts with an emphasis on those buyouts that will benefit a local mitigation or detention strategy that helps protect our citizens.

★ Drainage Improvements Improve Public Safety and Health

Rescuing flood victims costs taxpayers a lot of money, and the effects of flooding can take a significant toll on public health when stormwater contains trash, debris and pollutants or infiltrates our sanitary sewer system and causes those lines to overflow into structures and in streets where people may have to wade to get to safety. Flood damage creates a risk of mold and other harm. By lowering the risk of flooding and flood damage, we can reduce the burden on taxpayers of emergency rescue and help protect Houstonians from harmful effects of floodwater and damage, which disproportionately affects the elderly and low-income citizens.



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