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Innovative plan could break logjam on flood improvements

Deal on funding seeks to expedite delayed bayou improvements

By Mike Morris, Houston Chronicle

Days after scores of Houstonians sacrificed their vehicles to yet another flood and a few homes took on water - some along Brays Bayou in the southwest - local leaders on Tuesday will announce an innovative deal to hasten improvements in that channel and two other local bayous after that.

The effort is intended to have a simple outcome - speeding up flood control work - but has resulted from complex negotiations spanning months and involving four levels of government.

In short, the city of Houston would ask the state for a \$46 million loan, which it then would give to the Harris County Flood Control District to speed up work on long-delayed Project Brays. The federal Army Corps of Engineers would reimburse the county after the work was done, ending the city's commitment.

City officials hope to repeat that process for two other bayous - White Oak and Hunting, likely in that order - ultimately forwarding the county about \$130 million, city "flood czar" Steve Costello told council staffers at a Monday briefing. City Council will consider the loan application Wednesday.

Costello, who first approached county officials last June to offer city assistance, said those talks wound up aligning with the state Water Development Board's decision to, for the first time, fund flood control projects from a fund typically restricted to water and sewer work.

"The whole idea is to collapse the schedule - whether it's a year, whether it's 18 months, we're not quite sure," Costello said. "Yes, the city is going to be taking the risk because we're going to be waiting for the money, but we're confident that this is the start of a long-term relationship and we think it's going to work very well."

Action over 'rhetoric'

Even if federal reimbursement does not come quickly, the cash-strapped city's exposure is minimal, according to a document provided to council offices. The first debt payment - a flat \$1.6 million per year - would not be due until late 2018.

The mayor's office did not make Turner or Costello available for an interview ahead of a formal Tuesday announcement, and Flood Control District director Russ Poppe deferred to Turner in also declining to comment. Turner did speak about the effort, however, at a recent civic club gathering.

"People have made it very clear: You don't want to hear the rhetoric from us anymore; you don't want the verbiage. I got that," Turner said. "The city will assume the responsibility of the loan that we're getting from the Texas Water Development Board, because it's important for us to move forward on this project. As soon as the feds just give us the indication that the other two will be reimbursed, then we'll move forward."

Sluggish federal reimbursement has been a key factor in dragging Project Brays out for two decades - and the work, originally slated to finish in 2014,

could take yet another 20 years to finish, Flood Control District documents state, unless sufficient funding becomes available. The county and the Corps split the costs 50-50, though the county typically pays up front and awaits reimbursement.

County Commissioner Steve Radack, whose precinct includes many of the 700,000 residents in the Brays Bayou watershed, said Flood Control initially expected to get \$50 million in federal reimbursements each year for the roughly \$450 million project. County records show the annual average over the last 18 years has been less than \$11 million, however. Flood Control will not hit its target completion date of 2021, Radack added, without city help.

"If this works, the 2021 date that was being thrown around, it's possible we could actually beat that. But frankly, without this money, it's safe to say there's no way to make 2021," Radack said. "As far as I'm concerned, if the city wants to go out and help the county be able to do more projects, we'd love to have their assistance."

The city's duty is to carry stormwater from residents' rooftops to the bayous, and the county's role is to take that water from the bayous to Galveston Bay.

Out of the floodplain

The city proposal would fund the replacement of eight bridges over the bayou, all east of Buffalo Speedway, Costello said, to accommodate the new channel. The county had rebuilt 10 bridges as of November, with a total of 30 requiring replacement.

Work has already finished on four upstream detention basins capable of holding 3.5 billion gallons of stormwater, and ongoing work to widen about two-thirds of the bayou - which starts west of Highway 6 and ends 31 miles to the east, where it flows into Buffalo Bayou - is also 60 percent finished.

Project Brays is expected to remove 15,000 homes and businesses from the 100-year floodplain, including 3,500 homes at a high risk of flooding. County officials estimate the work already done on the project prevented 2,000 homes or businesses from flooding during the 2015 Memorial Day flood and saved another 100 during that year's Halloween flood.

"Meyerland was really hit so badly in the last few years. We're inundated with phone calls, and the mayor is too," said Councilwoman Ellen Cohen, whose district includes Meyerland and other neighborhoods in the Brays watershed. "I'm particularly pleased that we are where we are."

Among those residents is Marla Cooper, who has lived one block off the bayou for 33 years. Her home did not flood until the Memorial Day 2015, and then again on Tax Day 2016, one day after she had moved her belongings back in. A storm last Wednesday led some nervous neighbors with chest pains to call for an ambulance, Cooper said, only to have the vehicles stymied by flooded streets.

"If they can expedite that, that would be a great thing," Cooper said. "Everybody in my neighborhood was out watching, scared to death. It got about 4 feet from the front doors again, lots of messed up cars and all that. I was thinking to myself, 'I can't do this again.'"

<http://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/Innovative-plan-could-break-logjam-on-flood-10878384.php?t=80a8dc35d0438d9cbb&cmpid=twitter-premium#photo-9824206>