

Fighting flooding: Program educates about options in age of severe weather

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Not many projections in life rank as certain as death and taxes, but future flooding in and around [Skokie](#) is awfully close.

There is only so much capacity in any stormwater management system, and with an increase in the number of heavy rainstorms, as well as their severity in recent years, flooding is not likely to disappear any time soon.

That doesn't mean the impact of increasingly heavy storms can't be better mitigated through education, careful planning and execution.

The League of Women Voters Evanston/Skokie went a long way in providing some of that education April 12 in a program, "Storm Water From the Ground Up," at the Skokie Public Library.

"We have a problem. With climate change, what's projected for the Midwest is more frequent, intense rainstorms," said Krista Grimm, vice president of the League of Women Voters in the Lake Michigan region.

Grimm has made her presentation more than 20 times — originally thanks to a grant by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources through its Coastal Management Program.

Climatologists have asserted that areas including the Midwest are under a new weather pattern. Rainfall records over more than 100 years presented by Grimm showed that more rain has fallen recently because of a weather pattern that started shifting as far back as 1965.

"This trend is expected to continue going forward and intensify," she said. "We will continue to have more severe flooding in this area."

Village and cities like Skokie and Evanston have combined sewer systems. When rain is heavy enough and pounds down in short time, the accumulated water can overwhelm the sewer system, causing backup — often in people's basements.

Skokie installed a multi-million dollar storm drainage system in the 1980s, which has helped alleviate more regular flooding in the village. It allows accumulated rain to pond in the street, slowly running down the sewer so it isn't overwhelmed all at once.

"People would rather see that rain in the street than in their basement," Grimm said.

But even with such measures, Skokie, like other communities, experiences flooding when rainstorms are severe enough. It was almost exactly two years ago when the village broke in its new emergency center inside the Skokie Police Department because of a relentless rainstorm that went on for nearly two days.

The village received dozens of calls about flooded basements and other areas of homes. No stormwater management system could accommodate that much rain all at once.

As Grimm noted, this area was once wetlands, which helped handle heavy rains. (Skokie means "marsh" in the language of the Pottawatomie). But the development of buildings and houses with impermeable surfaces has contributed to more difficult flooding problems.

Illinois has lost more than 90 percent of its wetlands, mostly because of urban development, Grimm noted.

"We no longer have these wetland systems available so we have put in sewer systems instead," she said.

During most times, the sewer system works well. But when unusual amounts of rain fall, it can become strained. At the worst of times, the locks to Lake Michigan have to be opened up, which means sewage is dumped into the lake.

Grimm said that people can make smarter choices in addressing potential flooding. Some of those individual choices include not using as much water during a storm; clearing storm grates; properly disposing of pet waste and other hazardous materials and more.

Another valuable tool to help alleviate the impact of heavy rain is to incorporate more green. More municipalities, including Skokie, have made sure building projects include more landscaping — whether for their infrastructure or by adopting more stringent regulations around development for businesses and residences.

In one instance recounted by Grimm, a member of the League of Women Voters practically solved her severe basement flooding by using more plants outside her home.

Disconnecting downspouts, using rain barrels and cisterns and planting more trees are among other effective flood-reducing measures people can take, she said.

Grimm also emphasized important community and regional measures to combat flooding such as installing bioswales, banning toxic substances such as coal tar sealants and pushing for a building code that mandates sufficient permeable surfaces for new building projects.

Also speaking during the program was Metropolitan Water Reclamation District Commissioner Debra Shore, a Skokie resident.

"We live in a landscape that has increasingly impervious surfaces with parking lots, buildings, roads and sidewalks, back decks and brick patios and so forth," Shore said. "We've given water no place to go."

Shore also talked about the escalating trend of tearing down smaller houses and building larger houses with less permeable surfaces, contributing to the problem.

She wants to see municipalities, including Skokie, become more receptive to using permeable surfaces such as permeable concrete.

Permeable surfaces can be found now in various venues such as a parking lot at Cellular Field to a train station lot in Glenview. The culture is changing, Shore insisted.

But she believes many municipalities would benefit from changing their ordinances to encourage use of more permeable surfaces for building projects.

In her own case, she said, she was prevented from replacing her asphalt with anything but concrete or paving brick under Skokie's village code. All of these surfaces are impervious.

"We need to continue to work to change the ordinances at every municipality," she said. "And at a minimum not put impediments in people's way who want to convert to a permeable surface."

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