Message

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Sent: 11/30/2020 2:06:25 PM
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CC: Lupton, Jane [lupton.jane@epa.gov]; Fong, Tera [Fong.Tera@epa.gov]; Harris, Michael [harris.michael@epa.gov]
Subject: Illinois EPA announces Centreville flooding relief plan; residents want more answers

FYI. Just wanted to make sure you were aware. Thanks. -Rett

https://www.bnd.com/news/local/article247463105.html

CENTREVILLE

New grant funding for a possible plan that would show ways to alleviate some flooding issues in Centreville, East St. Louis and Alorton has left some worried about its effectiveness.

In mid-November, the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency announced the Prairie du Pont Watershed grant, a grant worth up to $1 million in "initial funding" for a firm that could develop a watershed-based plan to fix nearly constant flooding in Centreville, East St. Louis and Alorton.

The grant would go to a firm that would develop a community-endorsed plan and help implement "voluntary" projects that would reduce stormwater runoff and fix "minor" sewer system infrastructure issues in the area, according to the IEPA.

"The complex network of wastewater systems and flooding issues in this region require a focused approach and financial and technical resources from a number of different regulatory agencies," said Illinois EPA Director John Kim in a statement. "Our staff has been engaged in productive discussions with local residents, community groups, advocacy organizations, and elected officials to identify short and long-term steps to reduce the stress on the existing sewage collective system and improve local surface and groundwater quality."

The firm would be tasked with engaging with local stakeholders in each community to develop a plan to tackle the infrastructure problems in the area and use that plan to create a final plan for the entire watershed.

For Centreville Citizens of Change, a local group of residents who say decades of neglected infrastructure and inaction from local officials have left their homes repeatedly inundated with floodwater and raw sewage, the grant opportunity came as a surprise.

Flooding is a constant problem for the majority of the residents who live in northern Centreville. Stormwater and raw sewage regularly floods homes, yards and roads causing damage and sometimes trapping residents in their houses.

Residents in the area said even moderate rainfall causes enough flooding that some are trapped in their homes for days. Stormwater often inundated the city's aging infrastructure, causing raw sewage to back up into yards, often leaving pools of brown water littered with toilet paper and tampons, they say.

The damage is extensive, expensive to repair and a drain on property values. Many Centreville homes have been abandoned. Those who remain live with the stench that hangs over their neighborhood. They have additional concerns about its effect on their health, they say.

A map of the northern area of Centreville, where residents say raw sewage regularly floods their streets, lawns and homes. *GOOGLE MAPS*

$20 FOR 1 YEAR

In July, U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth, D-Illinois, visited the city and pledged that her office would look for solutions.

Over the past several months the IEPA has met with residents during their monthly meetings, giving them updates on the progress of fixing the issues in the area.

CENTREVILLE RESIDENTS WORRY OVER TRANSPARENCY, ACCOUNTABILITY

Nicole Nelson, an attorney who has been trying to help find solutions to the community's issues, said there was never any mention of the grant before it was announced.

"We were surprised and a little disappointed in the lack of transparency," Nelson said. "It was released under the guise of working with the community but they're really not. The residents don't know about it."

Nelson and her legal partner Kalila Jackson have been looking for solutions for the residents of Centreville for nearly three years. In the summer, the attorneys filed a lawsuit on behalf of several residents of Centreville against the city and Commonfields of Cahokia, the entity that operates wastewater systems in Centreville, in an effort to have the flooding issues fixed.

What appears to be raw sewage and storm water are being pumped out of a pipe in the 200 block of North 82nd Street in Centreville. Neighbors complain about the stench when the temperatures are warm. Tampons, toilet paper and other items can be seen in the water and on the ground near the pipe. Derik Holtmann *DHOLTMANN@BND.COM*

The lawsuit was filed on behalf of two Centreville residents, Cornelius Bennett and Earlie Fuse, just two of many residents in Centreville who say decades of flooding have damaged their homes and threatened their health.

IEPA spokeswoman Kim Biggs said more transparency on the possible project lies ahead and that the IEPA couldn't legally discuss the grant with the public while it was developed.

"Watershed stakeholder involvement is vital to the development of the watershed-based plan, and the facilitator that receives this grant will work with all interested watershed stakeholders," Biggs said in an email. "This award is designed to engage a facilitator to deliver scientific and technical expertise and take the watershed stakeholders through the watershed-based planning development process."

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Duration 2:20

U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth addresses flooding and sewer issues in Centreville, Illinois

U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth , (D) Illinois, addresses her concerns after attending a meeting concerning the flooding and sewer issues facing residents of Centreville, Illinois. BY DERIK HOLTMANN

Biggs said previous successful plans have included steering committees, planning committees and several other teams and subcommittees.

"Illinois EPA will work with the grantee to ensure that the planning committee represents a broad range of interests and also ensures that a diverse and representative range of stakeholders are engaged in the process," she said. "The planning committee needs to mirror the diversity of the watershed to ensure that the plan will be voluntarily implemented within the watershed."

However, at a meeting with the residents on Centreville on Tuesday, Nelson said the IEPA's presentation of the project left many residents and the team supporting the residents with worries about accountability and how long it will take to get relief.

"Our questions as a team and residents is when do they get relief?" Nelson said. "If it's a couple of years of planning and if it's also a volunteer program with little accountability how and when will they get relief?"

Residents at that meeting asked IEPA how those who were put in charge of planning would assure problems in North Centreville were resolved, but Nelson said no clear answer was given. She added that, because the plan and projects that came from the plan would be voluntary, there isn't any assurance that relief for residents will eventually come.

CITIES SAY DEADLINE MAY BE TOO SOON

Alorton City Manager LaMar Gentry said the city is currently looking into the program as well, but said the speed of the process was unusual. The deadline for applications for the project is Dec. 10.

"It just came out on Thursday (Nov. 19), and it's due at the beginning of next month, which is kind of crazy," he said on Tuesday. "We're trying to figure out what's the rush, and it's confusing to be quite honest."

Centreville Mayor Mark Jackson and East St. Louis Mayor Robert Eastern did not respond to requests for comment on the grant and plan and whether their cities would be engaging with the project. East St. Louis City Manager Brooke Smith said that she wasn't aware of the grant.

Biggs said the speed of the application process was set in hopes of having the grant award in place so that its recipient could start working before leaves begin to return in spring, which could hamper the study of the area's issues.

However, Gentry said there were other confusing parts of the news release that he has yet to have answered by IEPA. He hopes to receive answers to his questions on Monday.

"It's unusual, what I'm seeing so far," Gentry said. "They're talking about a watershed area that's further south from here and near Columbia, and it's confusing because it says (it's for) Alorton, Centreville and East St. Louis, but the area that they're talking about in question is south from here."

Gentry was one of the individuals named in the Centreville residents lawsuit along with Centreville Township Supervisor Curtis McCall Sr., Commonfields of Cahokia's Superintendent Dennis Traiteur and Mayor Jackson.

Alorton and Centreville are currently in the process of merging to become one city and due to the results of the Cahokia Heights consolidation vote during the November election, the two cities will then merge with nearby Cahokia.

Alorton Mayor JoAnn Reed said the grant opportunity came at a "perfect time" when the cities are set to become one. She said if the flooding issues that plague the are could be fixed before the consolidation is complete, it would help "breathe new life" into the community.

"It's truly long overdue, but it's an opportunity for us to solve the problems that we've been having that has long plagued us," she said. "The problem that they've been dealing with was so beyond Alorton and Centreville. It encompassed some structural engineering problems that we simply couldn't handle on a lower level, so this is something that has taken a while to manifest, and now it needs this attention."

Centreville resident Walter Byrd stands in his side yard next to raw sewage and his attempt to keep the sewage from backing up into his home. DERIK HOLTMANN *DHOLTMANN@BND.COM*