

Residents of Hartford's North End wrestle with storms, flooding, sewage backups -- and questions of racial equity

By KENNETH R. GOSSELIN
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Upper Albany resident June Lyons stands in her basement on Sargeant Street in Hartford which had nearly two feet of water in it after strong storms in late summer. She had thousands of dollars in damage. (Mark Mirko/Hartford Courant)

HARTFORD — Late summer storms that dumped record-setting rain in just hours still have residents and business owners in Hartford's North End cleaning up after the mess, some having seen human feces floating in their basements.

A long-term solution — expensive and likely requiring support from surrounding suburbs — seems bogged down to many, leaving some residents to wonder if it isn't tied to the location in the city.

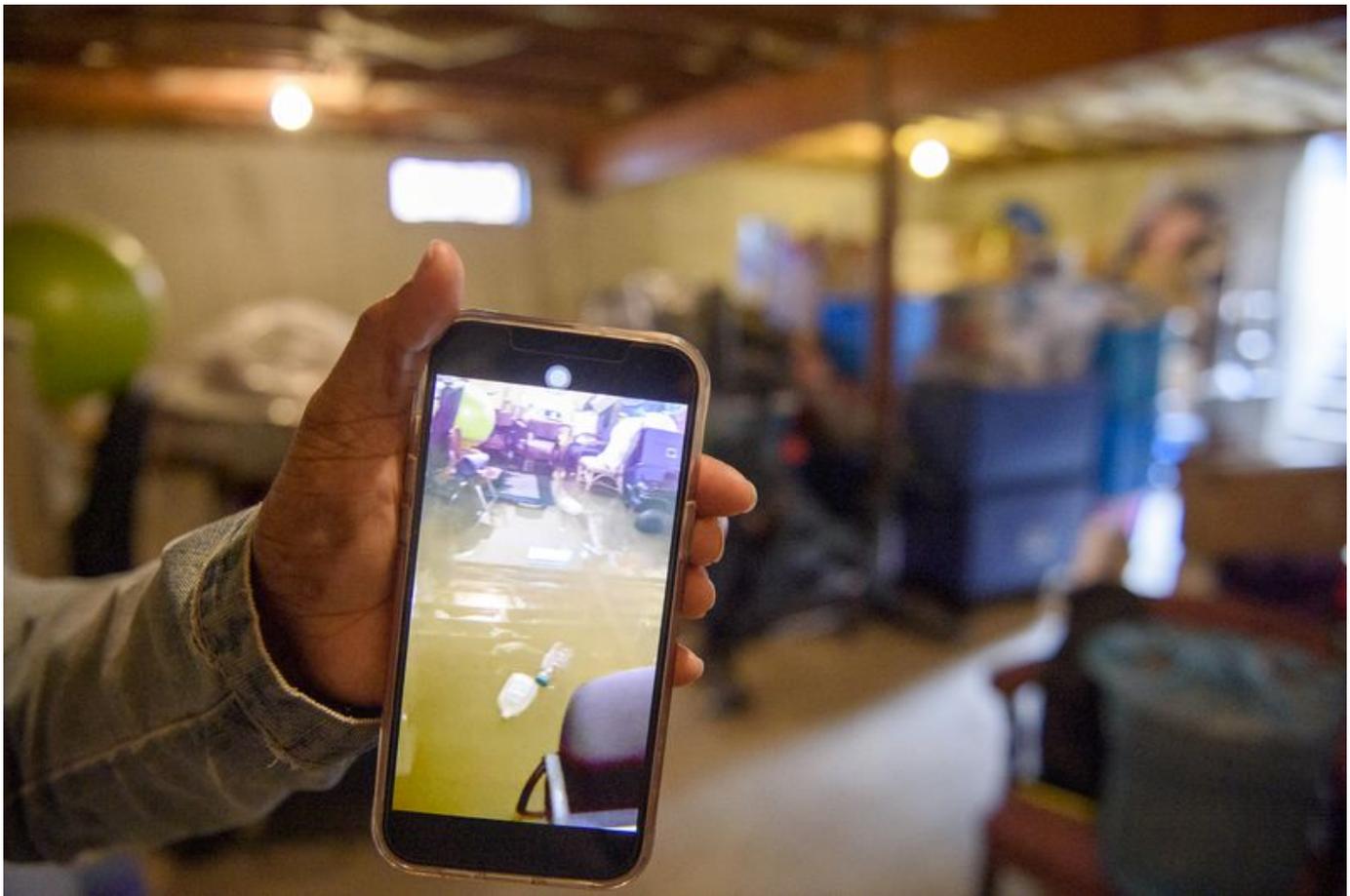
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“Why is it that people in the Upper Albany area area, the Blue Hills area, the Granby Street area and all those areas that are predominately Black are having to deal with these issues?” said June Lyons, a resident on Sargeant Street whose basement flooded during Storm Fred in August. “Why can’t it be rectified? I really do think this is part of environmental injustice and the inequalities that we have to deal with.”

Property owners are demanding a solution be found to flooding troubles that have plagued the Upper Albany, Blue Hills and Northeast neighborhoods for years, if not decades. And those concerns are growing as climate change threatens to bring more storms with the intensity of the recent Fred and Hurricane Ida.

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“People are just fed up,” said Lyons, who has lived on Sargeant Street for nearly two decades. “It’s just really frustrating to know that every time it rains, you think, ‘ah, damn.’ You’re just constantly checking to see whether or not there is going to be some flooding.”



Upper Albany resident June Lyons displays a photograph of her basement after it was flooded in a strong late summer storm. (Mark Mirko/Hartford Courant)

For years, Lyons, who runs a business out of her home selling body butter and other skincare products, has dealt with modest water back-ups in her basement. Finally, she bought plastic storage tubs to cut down on what she’d have to drag out, dry out and put back.

But when Fred hit, Lyons wasn't prepared for what she saw when she went down to her basement: nearly 2 feet of water, her plastic bins floating, and what turned out to be \$7,000 in damage.

Lyons shows a visitor a video in which she can be heard sloshing through her flooded cellar, but there also is another sound.

"That's me, crying," Lyons said. "There was a lot of water, but thank God, I didn't have any sewer."

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A couple of blocks away on Albany Avenue, landlord Alburn Montague wasn't so lucky.

Raw sewage backed up into the basement of his apartment building after Ida, knocking out the controls to the six boilers that heat four apartments and two storefronts.

"It was a strong odor down here," Montague said. "I threw bleach and things down here to help, too."

Montague points a flashlight toward the boilers to show high-water marks, despite the boilers being up on cinderblocks. He said he's looking at tens of thousands of dollars in damages.

Climate change

Like Lyons, Montague said he always had a little water, but nothing like what he saw after Ida. He worries that more frequent flooding of this magnitude will start to compromise the building's foundation and walls.

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The Metropolitan District Commission, the regional sewer and water authority, says there are plans for further upgrades in Blue Hills, that could cost hundreds of millions. But the improvements are still years away and require approval in a referendum of MDC's member towns.

In Upper Albany, the combined sewer and storm water systems on Albany Avenue likely need to be separated, the MDC said. The project could cost \$20 million to \$35 million, the MDC says, coming just a few scant years after a major, \$30 million road and streetscape project was completed.

Hartford Mayor Luke Bronin said the city is working with the MDC on short- and long-term resolutions, with separating sewer and storm water systems in mind. In some cases, special valves can control back-ups, Bronin said.

But despite any upgrades, the underground pipe system in Hartford is nearly a century old in many parts of the city and even new, larger pipes still may not be able to handle sudden, violent downpours, Bronin said.

"At the end of the day, this is a problem that we feel extreme urgency to fix," Bronin said. "But we also have to acknowledge that it's the result of changing weather patterns that are going to change the way we live in this community and every community."

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"And I think we are just beginning to see how severe the impact of climate change will be," Bronin said.

Bronin said Hartford's North End is not alone in flooding problems. The city's West End saw its share recently as did nearby towns such as West Hartford and Newington.



Albany Avenue landlord Alburn Montague points to the water mark on his furnace in the basement of his apartment building. (Kenneth R. Gosselin/Hartford Courant)

Flood after flood

This fall — in the wake of Fred and Ida — flooding has become the hot topic at block watch and other community meetings in the North End.

On Wednesday night, dozens of neighbors packed a meeting at the North End Senior Center. They described for Bronin, MDC officials, state legislators, city council members and other state officials what they are up against, often in graphic terms.

Priscilla Johnson-Headley and her family bought a house on Lyme Street in Blue Hills in 2012. Ever since 2014, the family has experienced ‘flood after flood after flood.’

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Johnson-Headley recounted that she’s had to replace her washing machine six times, her furnace four times and her water heater twice. Her insurer is warning that she could be dropped, if she makes more claims.

“I have walked in poop, and I couldn’t tell if it was my house or my neighbors on the block,” Johnson-Headley said. “We literally had the sewer in our basement.”

When Fred struck Aug. 19, there was so much water, ‘our sump pump just stopped because it couldn’t handle it.’

Like others, Johnson-Headley said she can’t get flood insurance because she is not in a flood zone.

Others at Wednesday's meeting said their entire homes were surrounded by water during Fred. One property owner said his shed tipped over, ruining a snow blower, lawnmower and other equipment.

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Meanwhile, on Upper Albany, Montague wonders why the drainage wasn't addressed when tens of millions of dollars were spent on the streetscape.

No funding

Scott Jellison, MDC's executive director, said it offered to separate the one system running down Albany Avenue in 2012, but the MDC couldn't pay for the storm water portion because the road is controlled by the state.

"And unfortunately, no one wanted to fund that project," Jellison said.

Bronin said he couldn't comment on that decision because it preceded his administration.



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If the improvements were again contemplated, the MDC could help with the planning but it couldn't help pay for them, Jellison said.

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Property owners say they are tired of finger pointing and just want a solution to the problem.

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"We know that we're not Louisiana," said Debra Jervis, a lifelong resident of Blue Hills, whose basement flooded during Fred. "We have not lost our homes, and we understand that there are really bad scenarios in other states. But what we are going through right now is such that we've never experienced before, and we're not able to cope with that."

Marilyn Risi, executive director of Upper Albany Main Street Inc., a community development organization, said executing a solution "may take years."

"But it should be discussed and thought about and not thrown over on the side until the next storm, or until somebody gets really sick and you have a health problem going on," Risi said.

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