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The Public Ought to Know: Uncleaned catch basins contribute to flooding



Corey Bearak

By Corey Bearak

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Growing up in New Hyde Park's Langdale Apartments a block inside the city line, my friends and I would look forward to the heavy rains that overflowed Langdale Street at 81st Avenue and created a rapids-like mini-waterfall down a corner basement stairwell.

When my children were young, we joined my friend and teacher, environmentalist Joe Varon, and his two sons, Joshua and Seth, on forays into Alley Pond Park's natural areas. We viewed running streams that formed after similar storms. It reminded me of Catskills streams I trekked on with Aunt Audrey when grandparents Sol and Jeannette Stone summered at Hunter Mountain.

During those moments I thought little of the storm flooding that made east-west passage along Hillside Avenue and Union Turnpike virtually impossible at Winchester Boulevard when I began to drive, or flooding that occurred frequently outside the Glen Oaks Library and old Century Movie Theatre (now a chain drug store) across from the Library at 255th Street and Union Turnpike.

Adequate drainage systems since installed reduce much flooding that heavy rains cause. But inadequate maintenance often reverses the gains, making it appear as though nothing changed. The city needs to more frequently clean catch basins which collect water that flows into seepage basins or storm

water systems.

Rain only bothers me when it causes my summer Deepdale pool club to close, or when it pours so hard an umbrella and raincoat offer insufficient protection, especially when I wear a suit. I experienced that most recently on my way to a program sponsored by Queens District Attorney Richard Brown at Queens Borough Hall last month.

Invariably, heavy rains cause flooding with curbs overflowing somewhere or other. My last haircut at Ideal Barbers occurred after a heavy August rain. Union Turnpike's north side at 254th Street overflowed the curb and I walked circuitously from my car to Frank's shop.

When I joined my local City Council's staff some 22 years and one month ago, I seized an opportunity to work through an elected official to redress conditions I observed growing up in New Hyde Park, Glen Oaks and Floral Park.

Seepage basins were installed throughout those neighborhoods during the 1980s, including one that addressed flooding in the Glen Oaks Playground softball field next to P.S. 115 where rainwater often extend from home plate and the pitcher's mound to the third base dugout. Other projects covered the streets outside and across from the Glen Oaks Library.

Later - after I got my first apartment in Glen Oaks and Rachelle and I bought our cooperative a few months later - I worked to get seepage basins installed along the Glen Oaks Oval around the corner from where we lived for almost two years.

From running a Councilman's office I also learned that new seepage and catch basins, if not cleaned frequently enough, eventually provide less protection against heavy flooding. When Sheldon Leffler chaired the Council's Committee on Environmental Protection, he often pressed the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) on the frequency of catch basin cleaning.

According to the Mayor's Management Report (MMR) issued last month for the Fiscal Year that ended last June, "The Department systematically surveys each of the City's 135,488 catch basins every three years." It does not discuss a cleaning schedule. The MMR reports DEP cleaned 43,956

catch basins. The report no longer, and has not for at least a decade, reported on the frequency of programmed or routine cleaning, which addressed 25,175 catch basins this year.

That may explain why my Community Board 13 District Manager Sally Martino Fisher noted, during September's discussion of city budget priorities, that DEP routinely cleans catch basins one every six years. As a council aide, I routinely suggested constituents with flooding problems to call in every six months to get catch basins cleaned. Call it preventive maintenance.

In August a young couple died from electrocution from a down power line in a flooded out College Point street. Last month, Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum complained catch basin cleanings declined since 2002. No one focused on how the City funds DEP catch basin cleanings. We pay water and sewer taxes - charges that fund the cleanings.

City Hall might argue a more efficient cleaning schedule means higher water rates. Frequent cleanings should obviate much of the complaint driven cleaning, 18,781 (in response to 13,628 complaints) last year alone, allowing more resources for routine cleaning.

DEP must clean basins more frequently; until that happens, every six months call 311; ask Mayor Bloomberg to get your local catch basins cleaned.

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