Record rainfall events and the Frontera Wastewater Emergency notwithstanding, EP Water is focused on building resilience in the face of challenges over the past year. Summer 2021 included events that took a toll on EPWater’s water infrastructure, with the flooding of monsoon season. When heavy rain fell June 11-12, the San Simon Stormwater Improvement Project on Sidewalk East was 90% complete. Upon completion, the project would have diverted over 350,000 gallons per minute of stormwater from neighborhood streets into the Rio Grande River.

However, June flash flooding weakened roads on infrastructure, resulting in damage to the construction site. The Public Service Board approved an emergency resolution to fast-track repairs at San Simon, and in late May, we announced an accelerated project timeline.

A Look to stormwater system

In August, our crews continued intense rainfall events, setting records and further straining our infrastructure. On Aug. 12, a Central El Paso neighborhood was pounded by a 4.09 inches of rain in an hour, devastating the area and a 586-hour storm according to the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration.

Near Fort Bliss and Andrews Street, runoff from the Franklin Mountains scattered large rocks and debris, damaging property and vehicles. Many parts of our drainage system were overwhelmed by the volume of stormwater. West El Paso was also flooded by 6.0 inches of rain that day. More than 80 channels, junctions and ditches around the city were damaged or blocked by debris and rocks.

The 2020 Stormwater Master Plan established a roadmap for fiscal control originally estimated at more than $360 million. Under the plan, numerous capital projects have been completed at a total of $232 million, but so much more remains to be done.

At a critical juncture

An unprecedented allocation for the utility hit the road today in the 2021-22 fiscal year. The budget for capital improvements will grow from $242 million this year to $539 million next year.

For water and wastewater, half of this will be dedicated to necessary rehabilitation. For water and wastewater, assessments of our systems point to major rehabilitation needs. Our 2017 Water/Wastewater Plan showed that the next 20 years instead of 20. The budget for stormwater capital improvements will jump from $30 million this year to $70 million next year.

On Nov. 30, EPWater staff and I presented our proposed Fiscal Year 2022-23 Water/Wastewater budget for capital improvements to the PSB. For stormwater, with PSB direction, we have proposed a 2022 plan that focuses on critical stormwater infrastructure. On Aug. 12, a Central El Paso neighborhood was pounded by 6.0 inches of rain that day. More than 80 channels, junctions and ditches around the city were damaged or blocked by debris and rocks.

Looking ahead

We are happy to bid farewell to 2021, but the Public Service Board, I and my staff have engaged in the discussions around what happened and what is needed to prevent similar occurrences. We are proud of what we must accelerate implementation of our Stormwater Master Plan and power our proactive investments in rehabilitation to ensure our water and wastewater system’s reliability.

On this, I’d like to thank and congratulate all of the people who helped to get us to this point. This is not a one-size-fits-all plan. We have a responsibility to deliver the best possible service to our customers.

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