Weathering the storm

With no reason season in full swing, El Paso has already witnessed Mother Nature’s power to unleash flash flooding in the Chihuahuan Desert. The National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) classified 120-year storm in our area as 4 inches of rain in a 24-hour period. Some recent rain events totaled 4 inches of rain in less than an hour, for exceeding the capacity of parts of our stormwater system, leaving decoration behind.

Over the last 13 years, El Paso Water has built many new ponds, channels and pump stations that worked in recent storms to save lives and protect private property, but there is more work to do.

Many areas received close to a year’s worth of rain in just a few hours — a reminder that we can design flood control structures to withstand a certain level of storm, but even these can be overwhelmed by localized downpours. In response to recent rain events, the Public Service Board approved an emergency resolution authorizing EPWater to hire additional contractors to make repairs and assist with removal of large debris blocking hundreds of inlets and culverts in our stormwater system.

Working infrastructure

Since EPWater took over the stormwater utility in 2008, we have been delivering results. A Stormwater Master Plan that assessed flood control needs across the city was approved in 2010. The Plan identified more than $65 million in needed stormwater projects citywide. Nearly all capital projects were prioritized because of minimum public safety benefits. Those projects were completed along with a handful of flash-flooding projects, for a total investment of about $320 million.

• The utility’s largest project, the East and West Gateway Ponds, has worked to keep millions of gallons of stormwater off of I-10, avoiding a complete shutdown of the highway in Central El Paso.
• In Southwest El Paso, Fantasia Drive historically saw large amounts of rock and silt after heavy rains. The new Fantasia Channel, a concrete catch basin, has proven to be successful in collecting debris and controlling flooding.
• The Silver Springs Dam near Thunderbird effectively collected runoff and blocked 25 tons of large rock and debris that would have otherwise ended up on busy intersections of the Westside.
• In Northeast El Paso, the Stormwater Improvement Project reduced street flooding in the low- lying Lower Valley neighborhood.
• In Central El Paso, the improved Lee Trevino Drainage system captured most stormwater and allowed traffic to continue to flow along the busy street.

Stormwater fees at work

None of these projects would have been possible without the stormwater fees paid by residential and commercial customers. When the stormwater utility was established in 2008, the initial monthly fee for a typical home was $4.51. We lowered the fee, and it is still only $4.75. We listened to community concerns and increased the fee, raising it to $4.75. We know that’s not realistic. Instead, we have chosen to spread our investment of about $220 million.

Sometimes, we are asked what it will take to complete all the projects in the Stormwater Master Plan. We ran the numbers, and if we tackle every project over the next ten years, fees would have to increase by 240%. We know that’s not realistic. Instead, we have chosen to spread our stormwater investments over a longer period of time and to actively pursue federal and state funding. To date, EPWater has been awarded $2 million and an additional $24 million is pending for stormwater projects.

From the crews who clean our stormwater system year-round to the engineers that design our infrastructure, we have teams of people at the utility who are committed to serving the best interests of our community.

We will continue our stormwater mission to reduce flooding, but we also ask you to do your part:

• Dispose of trash properly to keep our storm drains clear.
• Never run drains during a high-flow, call 311 to report it.
• If your property has a tendência to flood, be prepared by picking up and utilizing our free sandbags.
• Listen to flood warnings and avoid driving on flashfloods.

Each year, we join with community partners, including the El Paso Fire Department and the Drowning Prevention Coalition to urge our community to Turn Around Don’t Drown. This simple act could save your life and those of your passengers.

On the Water Front is a publication of El Paso Water. Contact Christina Montoya at cmontoya@epwater.org or 915.594.5596 using TrueRemove™ for any comments or questions.