

# Preparing for hurricanes should not fall to ratepayers



Property appraisers in Orange County have been tasked with tallying up damage estimates that will help determine federal aid levels following Hurricane Irma. ( Aileen Perilla/ Orlando Sentinel)

By **Matthew Shudtz, Evan Isaacson**

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**T**he full scope of the heartbreaking devastation wrought by hurricanes Harvey and Irma — the human, economic and environmental toll — may not be completely understood for years. As we do what we can to help the victims, it is also time to think about how we can prepare for the inevitable here in Baltimore. After all, Baltimore floods more than most other cities in the United States and gets little help from our inadequate water infrastructure.

Every time a major storm visits our region, millions of gallons of sewage overflow from Baltimore's antiquated sewers. Worse, our sewer system has failed time and again under even the smallest rainfalls. In August, federal, state and city regulators and lawyers finalized a deal to modify the legal settlement originally signed in 2002 to upgrade sewer infrastructure by 2016.

The good news is that the projects needed to keep sewage from flowing into our basements and the **Inner Harbor** are some of the same ones needed to prepare for tropical storms. Modern stormwater management

technology provides us with the ability to make our city "spongier" — to absorb rain and slow down polluted runoff before it pools in streets, overwhelms storm drains, damages property and spills into local waters.

But an important question is how we'll pay for the work. Arguably, the primary reason that Baltimore failed to finish required sewer upgrades by 2016 was a lack of funding. However, a review of the city's past capital spending plans shows that Baltimore's water infrastructure spending has increased dramatically since 2002, with much of these costs shouldered by ratepayers.

Thanks to local advocates like Blue Water Baltimore, residents whose basements are ruined by sewer backups may soon have help. The modified consent decree now provides those impacted by backups with at least a small measure of relief (though a maximum of \$2,500 is not enough to fully compensate most affected households). However, all residents of Baltimore, particularly low-income households, also need relief from the constant pressure of ever-increasing water and sewer rates.

Why is it that we treat the cost of providing clean and safe water differently than other core municipal services? No one would argue that water isn't among the most essential human needs. So, perhaps what is needed is a new way of paying for our water infrastructure, one consistent with the notion that water is essential for life and a basic human right.

Right now, a significant majority of water and sewer costs are paid by ratepayers. Whether you are Baltimore's most or least wealthy resident, you essentially pay the same amount to use a gallon of water. But our country was built on a progressive system of taxation. Wealthier people pay a higher rate in income taxes and pay greater amounts in property taxes based on the value of their homes. These tax dollars then go to cities and states to take care of the basic functions of society, like first responders, schools, streets, libraries and many other services. Certainly, water, sanitation and flood control should belong in this category, too.

There is a debate in some policy circles about the affordability of water and sewer rates, and the National Academy of Public Administration is set to deliver a report to Congress this month that should add some helpful recommendations. But the problem is that most of the lobbyists for local governments and water utilities are more interested in addressing water affordability by weakening standards designed to keep our water clean and our communities safe from flooding.

We should not be asking communities to choose between clean water and affordable rates. Instead, city leaders should recognize that no one deserves to have their water shut off or to lose their home because they can't afford to pay increasingly expensive water bills. We need local officials to tell state and federal leaders that clean water is a right we all deserve. That means we need to work together to stop regressive rate increases, utilize a more diverse mix of sources to invest in water and move forward nationally with a bold plan to quickly repair, strengthen and modernize our infrastructure for drinking water, sewage treatment, and stormwater management.

As the rebuilding begins in the wake of Harvey and Irma, it's important we all learn one of the several lessons on offer: With more frequent and intense storms every year, we cannot afford more delays or old ways of

thinking about how we invest in our water infrastructure.

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