

Raise awareness of importance of flood control

OUR VIEWS PALM BEACH COUNTY'S FRIDAY FLOOD

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There is no offseason in South Florida for flooding, which means there is no offseason for worrying about flood control.

Last week's freak storm, which closed schools Friday in Palm Beach, Martin and St. Lucie counties but hit especially hard in and around Boynton Beach and Delray Beach, came in a traditionally dry month. Even with a perfectly maintained system, there might have been some flooding. Chances are, however, that not all parts of the system were perfect.

Flood control in South Florida is a three-tiered system. The South Florida Water Management District operates the primary canals and structures. Regional drainage districts control the secondary canals and structures. At the bottom, and too often overlooked, are the neighborhood, or tertiary, canals. Water must flow from those into the drainage district canals, and from there to the water management district canals.

Last year, Bob Brown became director of the Lake Worth Drainage District, which includes southeastern Palm Beach County and last week got the heaviest rains — 22 inches in Boynton Beach. Brown spent 26 years at the water management district, and Monday he said the drainage district was conducting its "post-storm assessment," focusing on areas where flooding lasted the longest. The district "is OK," Brown said, if communities "can get the water to us."

Many reasons can explain why communities can't always move the water. Lawn crews can blow clippings into the wrong places and clog drainage systems. Homeowners associations or property management companies can let maintenance slip. Some HOAs may not know the flood control system beyond those lines on the property tax bill for the water management and drainage districts. Brown said his agency conducted 60 slide shows last year for communities.

The communities that should pay closest attention are those built in the 1970s, before stricter regulations took effect. Brown says they tend not to have lakes, swales and other features that drain and store water. Homes were built at grade, making them more vulnerable even to slightly rising water.

Sometimes, though, the lack of communication involves more than homeowners. Brown recalls the flooding last May at Park Vista High School in west Boynton. A nearby drainage gate, he said, is managed by the school district and the county. Because of "changes in staff" and miscommunication, the gate stayed closed. Water rose even as the district canal was low. The problem has been fixed, Brown said, and last week Park Vista had no flooding.

County Commissioner Mary Lou Berger not only represents most of the areas that flooded, she lives in Kings Point, which was one of the worst. Berger agrees on the need for education, even as she and Brown note the extraordinary amount of rain that fell in just a few hours. No one could recall Interstate 95 being closed because of standing water. And by Sunday, the hardest-hit areas were functioning normally.

Everglades restoration will help. This week, the water management district breaks ground on a significant restoration project in western Palm Beach County. Still, as South Florida keeps growing — and reducing water storage — flood control becomes even tougher. After Tropical Storm Isaac in August 2012 and Friday's deluge, every drainage district and every community ought to determine whether its system could handle that much rainfall, or more. Hurricane rains don't come just during hurricane season.