

Recent Storms Underscore the Need to Invest in Stormwater Infrastructure

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In the past few decades, we have witnessed the pendulum swinging back and forth in California between managing drought, to questions about how we will handle too much water. While the weather might be fickle, one thing is certain, climate change will make extreme weather more common and will require residents to invest in their stormwater infrastructure.

In the last series of storms, “hard” infrastructure, designed to move water as quickly as possible away from populated areas, worked well in Los Angeles, which has devoted decades of planning and money to managing water in a region prone to flash flooding. San Diego, LA’s neighbor to the south, unfortunately experienced flooding that caused a lot of human suffering, destroyed homes and businesses, and wrought many millions of dollars of damage.

The lack of sufficient dedicated funding for San Diego’s stormwater needs has been outlined in several reports over many years, including [a report](#) by the Office of the Independent Budget Analyst in 2021. Flooding and stormwater quality issues are the result of the City’s aging infrastructure, reduced or deferred maintenance (because of inadequate funding), and a growing backlog of critical capital projects.

San Diego is not alone. The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) produces an assessment of the nation’s infrastructure every four years in its “Report Card for America’s Infrastructure.” The Society, which is the largest and oldest engineering organization in the country, also produces state report cards that are led by state chapter leaders. The [2019 Report Card](#) for California gave stormwater infrastructure a letter grade of “D+.” Much of the infrastructure is reaching the end of its useful life and is crumbling due to a lack of funding for repair and maintenance.

To put it in context, in 1990, San Diego imposed a fee of 95 cents per month per single family home for stormwater maintenance, and the fee has remained unchanged since then. (For reference, you could buy a gallon of gas in California in 1990 for 74 cents!) The current budget needed to run the city’s Stormwater Department is \$62 million, just for operations and maintenance. The city’s 2021 Watershed Asset Management Plan includes estimates of approximately \$5.5 billion through 2040 to address the capital improvements needed to achieve flooding and stormwater quality goals. Many cities throughout California are in a similar situation.

To its credit, the City of San Diego's Stormwater Department has been making progress in spite of this huge funding gap. Crews from the department routinely inspect and clean the massive network of underground pipelines, particularly in anticipation of imminent storm events, to help reduce flooding. In addition, the city received approval in 2022 for \$733 million in loan funds from USEPA's Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (WIFIA). These funds are helping to address some of the more urgent issues, but clearly more is needed.

In response to this need, in January 2024, San Diego City Council President Sean Elo-Rivera announced he is leading an effort to develop the funding needed to address flooding and stormwater pollution issues in his City. The proposed tax on the November ballot would require support from 2/3 of the city's voters in order to comply with Proposition 218. We applaud this effort. It is important to note that Proposition 218 provides other options (special assessments) that only require 50 percent approval, one where the measure is placed on the ballot by the City Council and each property owner gets a vote. In the case of the property owner ballot, the measure does not need to be timed with an official November election day, it can be initiated at any time. Proposition 218 is intended to require voter approval of tax increases, allowing the people to decide if they want to pool their resources to solve problems.

The case of Los Angeles demonstrates that where there is the will, voters can pass funding measures to address badly needed stormwater improvements. We helped with an effort in Los Angeles County in 2018 to pass Measure W, a county-wide measure to address similar needs for stormwater funding. The voters of Los Angeles County recognized the need, and that ballot measure was successful - the county is now generating \$280M annually to address stormwater mitigation for 88 cities. Voters around the state may also see the importance of improving their quality of life by protecting homes, businesses, and shared spaces. Beyond hard infrastructure, voters will also see the importance of improving their quality of life with green infrastructure that provides stormwater capture, increases shade on urban streets, addresses our local water supply in times of drought, and makes our cities more walkable and livable.

Green infrastructure (GI) or green stormwater infrastructure (GSI) is designed to mimic nature and capture rainwater where it falls. For example, rainwater has traditionally been routed from rooftops and pavement into curbs, gutters and underground storm drain systems in urban areas to get rid of rainwater as quickly as possible during storm events. Green infrastructure reduces and treats stormwater at its source by creating opportunities such as creeks, ponds, wetlands, and other water features to capture stormwater near where it falls and infiltrate it into soils as nature provided, before urban areas were covered with houses, streets, parking lots and other impervious development. These solutions can also provide other community benefits such as reducing localized flooding, increasing groundwater supplies and improving community aesthetics.

These latest storms may help people recognize the time has come to invest in vital infrastructure. Taxes are unpopular, but our parents raised us to appreciate the quality of life that taxes can provide. They taught us to be grateful for the opportunity to live within a society that pooled their resources to help pay for luxuries that we all now take for granted, like paved roads, clean water, free public education system. And now, stormwater infrastructure that can handle the weather extremes that are the new normal. We salute Councilmember Elo-Rivera, for his leadership of this important issue, and for giving the voters a chance to say yes.