

“Nothing could stop this monster”: what a historic flood teaches us about preparing for climate change

A destructive flood in 1921– and frequent disasters since – serve as a clear demonstration of a lack of environmental justice on San Antonio’s westside. Since then, community groups and elected leaders have worked to correct the wrongs and prepare for impacts of climate change to come.

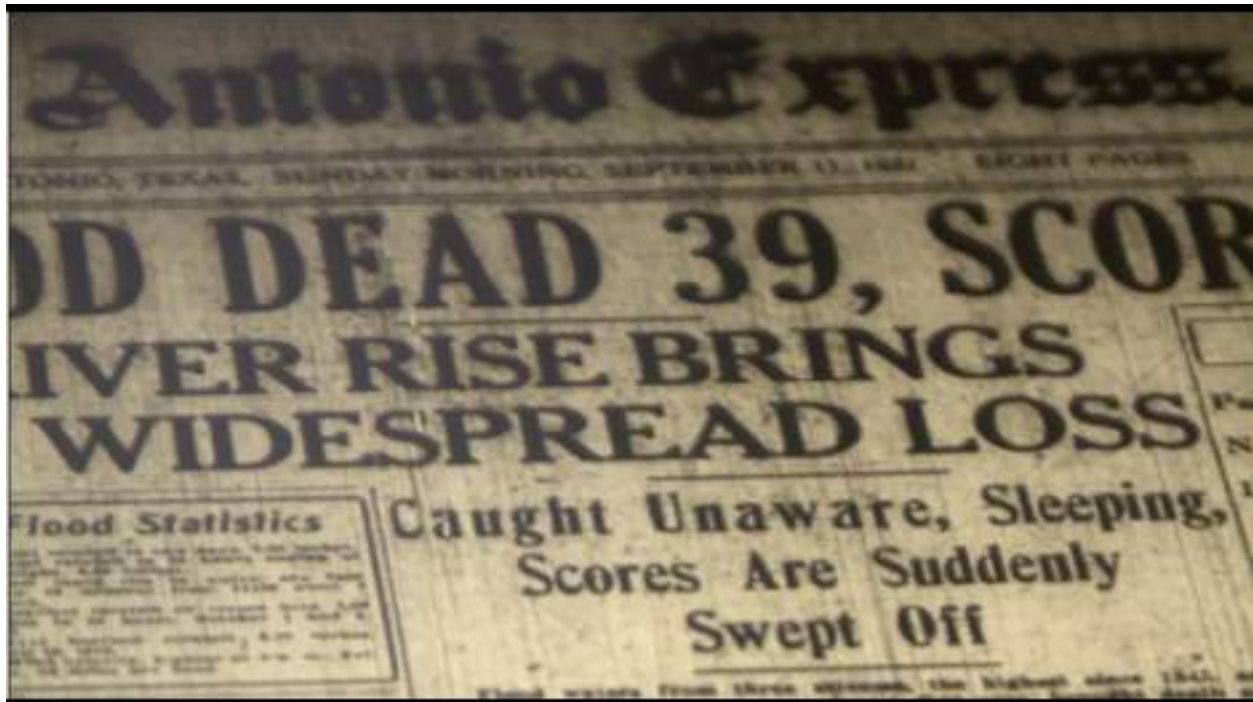


THE STORM HITS Remembering the Flood of 1921

This year marks 100 years since the flood of 1921 devastated San Antonio neighborhoods, took dozens of lives, and set the course for flood control planning and much of the design that currently outlines the city.

"It is, to my mind at least, the single most important event that happened in the city," said Char Miller, author of [*West Side Rising*](#), a new book on the event.

Days of heavy rain began before the rivers and creeks rose, submerging neighborhoods on September 9 and 10. Miller's research shows around 2,000 people were swept into the water, with an unknown number- potentially more than 80- dying in the flood.



The storm hit much of Central Texas, and impacted most of San Antonio. But some say because of the structural inefficiencies in westside neighborhoods at that time- and the unequal response that followed the flood- the westside took a disproportionate hit that lasted for decades.

"What it revealed was systemic racism, political malfeasance, I would call it, a sort of disdain for the west side on the part of the Anglo north side that was emerging at that time, and in the power elite of the city as well," Miller said. "That's part of the story. Part of the story also is, with the construction of the dam, for the very first time, an often-flooded San Antonio decided that, since the 18th century, it was finally time to stop floods, at least in one part of town."

Following the flood, the city responded by constructing the Olmos Dam, primarily to protect the downtown business core. It worked to correct the river. But it took years- and grassroots waves of action by residents- before lasting change came for those living near westside creeks.

"NOT JUST VICTIMS"

Residents rise up for change

Graciela Sanchez is Director of the [Esperanza Peace and Justice Center](#) on the Westside. She says while growing up near Alazán Creek, families would often hear of a drowning death after a torrential downpour.

"It was animals, it was little babies, it was adults, it was elders, everybody was so vulnerable," Sanchez said.

She connects the loss she saw in the 1970s to the inadequate response of prior years.



"There was a push, of course, to take care of downtown because economically, it was where the city was going to make its profits, and all of the Chambers of Commerce and business leaders were the ones that were going to benefit from fixing up the problems of the river," Sanchez said. "They didn't care that at least 80 people perished from that flood, mostly from this neighborhood. They were more concerned in terms of the economics of downtown.

"So when does this ever change? People have been protesting forever. People have been dying forever. But there's just neglect. And it's based on class, and it's based on race. And it has to stop," Sanchez said.

(In 2018, San Antonio looked back on 20 years since the 1998 floods that many say disproportionately impacted the East side. Learn more about the changes residents mobilized for there- and the work still left to do- [here](#).)

Henry Cisneros, former Mayor of San Antonio, says the results of years of neglect following the 1921 flood were fatal. Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, he says he saw people dying each year as the neighborhood became cut off by high water.

"Hundreds of people died. About 80 or so died in that 1921 flood but almost every year after that people died," Mayor Cisneros said. "I grew up in a neighborhood called Prospect Hill. Hill, because it's a little bit higher. But down beneath us, 3, 4 blocks from my house, people died pretty much every spring when the Apache creek exceeded its bounds and people would drown and houses were washed away. So San Antonio waited a long time 'til it did the right and fair thing- and acted on all the problems."



Cisneros says the Model Cities initiative of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society agenda poured some money into flood improvements, but he believes the real turning point came in the 1970s when Communities Organized for Public Service, now known as COPS/Metro, organized for change. They worked to get Hispanic and neighborhood leaders elected to office, and rallied on behalf of issues impacting everyday residents.

"They organized around what the people legitimately said- we can't live with this. This is horrible," Cisneros said. "This is so blatant, the discrimination involved, that they organized around floods and flooding. And that's when the city got serious."

Sanchez, too, credits COPS as a voice for change.

"In 1974, there was a flood over in the Zarzamora creekway, and they were just organizing to meet up with the then-city manager, and this flood took place and they were able to mobilize and challenge the city for lack of, again, any support and infrastructure for this neighborhood, especially the struggle around the floods and infrastructure for fixing up the creekways," Sanchez said. "Even that city manager learned in 1974 that back 20 years before there was a master plan that talked about spending money on the creeks of the westside, but there was neglect and erasure and they just spent the money downtown. So that's gotta stop."



COPS was made up primarily of westside and southside residents, and teamed up with the East Side Alliance- composed of African American and Hispanic low and lower-middle income churches- and the Metropolitan Congregational Alliance, made up of South, Central, and Northwest area Anglo and Hispanic Protestant lower-middle and middle-income churches. Today, the coalition is known as [COPS/Metro](#).

COPS demanded change on its own. It also worked to help elect neighborhood leaders. Miller's West Side Rising says that in the years that followed, the election of Hispanic leaders to local and federal offices brought more attention to the issues communities were facing. He writes of U.S. Representative Henry B. Gonzáles' work to obtain federal funding for drainage, housing and infrastructure and the work done by Mayor Henry Cisneros and Mayor Julian Castro.

Cisneros says each following bond issue allocated money toward the mission of fixing creeks, and during his time as mayor, he oversaw the building of a 60-foot diameter tunnel under the San Antonio River.

"We continue to make improvements," Cisneros said. "The River Walk, the 1968 fair, would not have been possible if we didn't have the steadying of water levels the straightening of the river made possible."

Cisneros says today, it's rare that people die from flooding from the Martinez, Apache, San Pedro, Zarzamora and Alazán creeks. They rise, but it typically doesn't result in the loss of life. Still, he says, there are lessons to learn- and to keep in mind when planning for the future.

"I think the flooding teaches us that a city doesn't succeed just because you locate it and will it to grow," Cisneros said. "We have to be attentive to how we interface with nature. And in the San Antonio case that has been flooding, but as we know there are other dimensions we have to be attentive to."

Sanchez says that while improvements were made, a lot more work is still needed to catch up with the years of inequitable investment impacting the westside.

"We deserve it too. We have helped build this city," Sanchez said. "We're the laborers. We are the people who make the least amount of money but we're the ones that work in the tourism industry, cleaning the toilets, making the beds of all the people who travel from far, we're the ones that pick up their luggage and make tourists feel at home."

We shouldn't be left as secondary citizens and yet in 2021, 100 years after the flood in 1921 we still live in very similar conditions and with many, many of the same problems."

"CENTERING PEOPLE"

Learning for the Future

Ben Acovio says he's lived on San Antonio's westside off and on for 66 years -- his wife's family, for 70.

"COPS Metro did a good job of getting all the neighborhood associations, getting everybody together, and getting drainage for the whole southside of the city," Acovio said. "They built some great drainage ditches along Apache Creek, Leon Creek, all these places, you have 50 foot drops for drainage, 40 foot drops, 20 foot drops. The inner city is taken care of from all these great drainage ditches COPS and everyone worked for but there are still some lacking spots for the city. And it's not just our neighborhood- I'm sure there are other places in the city that have the same problem."



Acovio walked KENS 5 around his neighborhood near Collins Garden Library on Park Avenue, showing spots he says still have trouble when the rain comes, including an inlet that had been filled in with trash and dirt.

"Right in front of us is an elementary school," Acovio pointed out. "The parents have to put kids on their shoulders to get across. We have the street behind us, street in front of us, to the left and to the south. All that water feeds into this area. So our concern for our neighborhood is the drainage for the kids, so the kids can get to school."

Acovio has created a list of spots he says could use improvement, and connected with new District 5 Councilwoman Teri Castillo's office in hopes of seeking change. He recommends other residents across the city do the same, pinpointing problems early to prevent more dangerous issues down the road- and holding elected officials accountable.

"Rather than react, let's be proactive in everything we do," Acovio said. "We asked people to go out and vote, we got good council members in there, now let's let them work for the election we got them."

Councilwoman Castillo encourages that attitude- and identifies organizing, historically and in the present, as a crucial vehicle for justice.

"When we ground ourselves in history we learn that communities have always been organizing for public services," Councilwoman Castillo said. "When we were on the campaign trail, going door to door, we heard a lot about drainage or lack thereof. Flooding, every other block its flooding and folks were asking, what are we doing to address these drainage issues in neighborhoods? We see you're investing in beautification projects along linear greenways, but what about my neighborhood?"

(The city of San Antonio approved the allocation of millions of dollars toward new drainage capital projects and drainage infrastructure. To learn more, click [here](#).)

"City leadership has an opportunity and a duty to prioritize drainage in San Antonio," Councilwoman Castillo said. "To ensure we minimize the potential death, loss of property, when it comes to flooding in San Antonio."

Councilwoman Castillo, Sanchez, Cisneros and Miller all identified lessons taught by the aftermath of the flood of 1921 that underscore the need for thoughtful future investment. They want to see equitable improvements, but say true environmental justice means that changes are also made with consequences in mind.

"So for example as we develop the beautification projects along linear creekways, people want to live near that project- you can run, you can be healthy," Councilwoman Castillo said. "But unfortunately it causes the destabilization of our neighborhoods and we experience land speculation and predatory real estate practices. [We've gone] to the door-to-door speaking with people about environmental racism and the way they've experienced industrial development or beautification projects and how these have

neighborhood destabilization impacts. So when we talk about environmental justice, we need to be sure we're prioritizing and centering people and how it impacts neighborhoods, communities and people."

(Learn more about work underway through the Westside Creeks Restoration Project [here](#).)



Councilwoman Castillo says along with citywide plans, the city and community must support residents who are now experiencing foundational issues in their homes as a result of decades of poor drainage- exacerbated by the fact that redlining led to less durable housing stock in economically poor areas, including on the westside.

Former Mayor Cisneros agrees it's not just about drainage. City planners, elected officials and communities must keep all environmental concerns top of mind- responding and adapting as they go to ensure equitable solutions.

"For example, this winter we had the snow and cold snap that put into danger our power and water distribution," Cisneros said. "There will be other things- heat. If we go through additional climate change and global warming, what do we need to do to protect people from heat? And then there will be other infrastructure related, like broadband. I think the lesson is- be attentive. Anticipate, think through the worst case, and set out a plan to

address it. Even if it takes a long time, and even if you have to phase in the capital- a city can't stand still. It constantly has to be thinking about how to defend itself and improve itself."

Sanchez and Councilwoman Castillo encourage residents to organize and demand change and justice on behalf of their neighborhoods. That includes contacting their city councilmembers and county commissioners, and staying tuned in to discussions about budgets and bonds.

To find your city council member, click [here](#).

To find your county commissioner, click [here](#).