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FEATURED

Belmont trailer park residents say not much done to prevent a repeat of last year's flooding

'They keep pointing fingers'

By Alyse DiNapoli, Daily Journal staff
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Gabriela Guzman, a resident of the Belmont Trailer Park for 13 years, was displaced from her home for about two months as result of last year's New Year's Eve storm, and with recent rainfall and an



Flooded and fatigued: Residents of the Belmont Trailer Park look for answers

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expected El Niño winter, she and other residents are doubtful there's been enough improvements this year to prevent similar damage.

The 33-year-old mother of two young children cited the continuous lack of gas or hot water as the main reasons for such a delayed return to their home last winter, in addition to a kitchen floor in disrepair due to water damage. Randy Chavez said he and his girlfriend waded through chemical and sewage-contaminated water, which, at its worst, flooded up to their trailer door. Even after residents could return to their homes, applying for and receiving assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency or insurance companies took several months, if not longer.



“The water was just gushing in, even when the rain stopped. It was horrible,” said one resident, who preferred to remain anonymous.

Facing a barrage of questions and criticism over seemingly inadequate stormwater systems, some city councils took constituent concerns to heart. Citizen-led initiatives in San Mateo successfully advocated for a stormwater fee ballot measure to help fund better infrastructure, and it received the verbal backing of all councilmembers. The Belmont City Council has also discussed myriad grants it plans to seek for improved infrastructure, with some councilmembers reiterating the urgency given last year's weather.

But for residents at the Belmont Mobile Home Park — located along the west side of Highway 101 in between Harbor Boulevard and O'Neill Avenue — appealing to their elected officials for help over the past year has been a bureaucratic quagmire that hasn't provided much solace. The park occupies a unique spot within the Harbor Industrial Area, which is largely an unincorporated county

jurisdiction, but it also relies on some infrastructure owned or managed by the city of Belmont and also by the California Department of Transportation.

The county maintains a storm drain system right outside the park along Harbor Boulevard, and Caltrans retains full jurisdiction over another system closest to the park – located along the barrier wall dividing the freeway and park area – which is supposed to channel water to the east side of Highway 101 into the Belmont Slough and eventually the San Francisco Bay. The nearby Belmont Creek, also an influential part of flood patterns in the area, falls under numerous jurisdictions, including the city of Belmont.



Homes in the Belmont Trailer Park experienced severe flood damage last winter.

Alyse DiNapoli/Daily Journal

Legal action

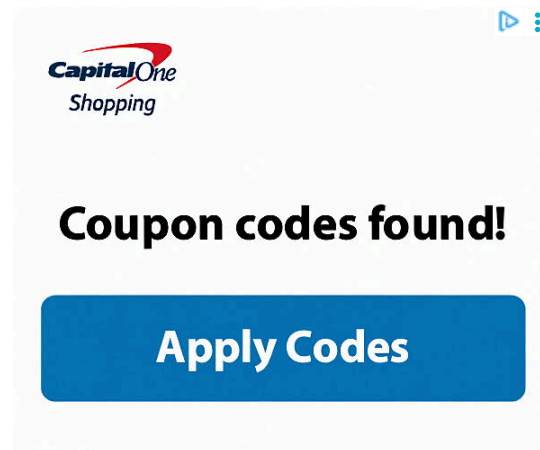
The lack of answers from so many entities is the reason attorney David Finkelstein said he and his client, who owns the property, decided to sue all three of them in a lawsuit filed earlier this year.

“They keep pointing fingers. The city says, it’s not us, it’s the county, or it’s Caltrans. And they go back and forth as to which one is responsible. So we sued all three entities, and basically we want them to fix it,” Finkelstein said.

The lawsuit alleges all three parties have failed to properly install, update and maintain key drainage systems in the park’s surrounding areas, and requests to have such work done on the part of the owner have largely been ignored, even going back to as early as 2009.

There’s not full agreement on what the primary reasons were for last year’s holiday flooding, but several county and city officials agree that debris build-up within the drainage systems was a key factor. Belmont Public Works Director Peter Brown said they’ve made sure to clear out as much debris as possible from their drains, and Deputy County Executive Justin Mates reiterated the same in reference to the county’s infrastructure. They both stated the drainage system closest to the park occupied by Caltrans also required cleanup, and while they’ve coordinated with the state agency more closely this year, they have little to no control over the upkeep of the primary drain infrastructure along the Highway 101 barrier wall.

“We’ve been engaging with Caltrans to make sure, to the extent that they can, that the line is maintained, and if there’s any greater intervention that’s needed, to perform that intervention,” Mates said. “But this is entirely Caltrans’ jurisdiction. They have the sole responsibility for it, and they also control all the information about it.”



He said the only details they have about the state agency’s storm infrastructure are based on what the county is told, and they do not possess any documentation on Caltrans’ system designs. Caltrans declined to comment on the matter.

Finkelstein agrees debris build-up exacerbated the flooding, but he added that’s not the only issue in need of remedy, referencing wooden gates in the area that are supposed to open when water reaches a certain level, allowing it to flow to the other side of the highway.

“Most of them are stuck closed and don’t open,” he said. “That’s the main problem. The secondary problem is Caltrans put in two pumping stations, but there’s not enough. They probably should have a third or a fourth one. And we’re not talking about a thousand dollars a gate. Those are very expensive.”

Settlement

For residents and property owners, flooding and its subsequent damage is not a new phenomenon. Seven years ago, Caltrans settled with the property owner for about \$163,000 for nearly identical problems. Finkelstein stated the agency confirmed they would fix the issues at that point, but added they have clearly remained unresolved. This time, they’re suing for about \$110,750 in compensatory damages and want to ensure any agreement includes a formalized commitment to remediating such infrastructural problems. The involved parties are expected to begin mediation early next year.

Chavez said he’s seen the flooding progressively worsen over that amount of time as well.

“When I first moved in here, the water would rise up sometimes, but it seemed to exit this area pretty readily ... and I wasn’t on pins and needles with any concern of everything flooding,” he said. “Now if there’s a regular rain, then I’m sitting there looking out the window or looking at my cameras and trying to figure out where the water’s at.”

One resident stated despite Caltrans’ presence in the area over the past several months, she’s skeptical of their efforts after checking the drainage holes with a broom and seeing they were still clogged. The owner stated he monitored the water drainage as it was raining over the last several days and hasn’t noticed any improvements.

Finkelstein said his client also received a letter from the county telling them to clear out water channels that are part of Caltrans’ property, something he said in an email is equivalent to “requiring the owners to trim the trees along sidewalks.”

Residents’ remedies

The ambiguity means the residents and property owners have had to take matters into their own hands and purchase pumps to push water into the county’s drainage system along Harbor Boulevard, which is normally prohibited but allowed due to a county exception. Chavez said his pump gets rid of a lot of water relatively quickly, but if the drain systems are clogged, the water simply flows back into the park.

“The owner reassured us that he is willing to put as many pumps as it takes to pump the water, but that it wouldn’t make a difference because the water would just circulate back into our zone,” Guzman said in her email, echoing the same sentiment.

Sandbags were used last year as a way to prevent some of the water from flowing into the park, which sits below the surrounding areas, meaning water naturally tends to flow in that direction. The lawsuit alleges they were told to remove their sandbags at the request of a Belmont councilmember who lived nearby and was concerned their placement would direct water to her property instead. Finkelstein declined to comment further on the matter but said they've been told the park is not allowed to erect them in what would be some of the most strategic areas. Mates said he is unaware of such a restriction policy but confirmed there are instances where sandbag placement must be approved by certain jurisdictions.

Despite the city, county and Caltrans' stated cleanup efforts, many residents remain wary, as unclear answers haven't left them with a feeling of security. Guzman said the property owner complied with her and other residents' request to clean out the brush that accumulated so water can flow better, and she plans to be better prepared this year with a go-bag on hand with essentials for her and her family.

"Neighbors are taking the same measures as well," she said. "We are more connected this year and are keeping an eye out for each other this time."

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