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LOCAL

Canton, South Dakota residents call for accountability in aftermath of 'thousand-year flood'



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South Dakota residents have been rebuilding this summer after flash floods in June damaged homes, destroyed valuables and displaced families across the tri-state area.

Canton was one of the areas hit hardest in South Dakota, with some areas in the city receiving more than 18 inches of rain between June 20 and 22, almost exactly a decade after a similar flood washed over the community in 2014. Government officials called this a thousand-year flood, and the small community of roughly 3,000 fell within the less than .1% chance of such a rainfall event happening in any given year, according to the National Weather Service in Sioux Falls.

Yet, without municipal support, the Canton community rallied to stack sandbags against homes and dispose of ruined furniture in June. Now, nearly two months later, residents are still trying to repair damages and return to their normal routines. And they want to see administrative and structural changes in Canton, so that a situation like this doesn't happen again, or at minimum, loss can be proactively mitigated.

Gregg Ulrickson, a landlord on North Cedar Street, said his apartments filled with 2 feet of water during the flood. All the drywall in the building needed to be replaced, along with the cabinets and furniture.

"It's everything," he said. "There's just no end to it."

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Ulrickson expects to re-paint everything by the end of the week and wants to begin renting out apartments again by Oct. 1, after residents were forced to leave their units. But outside his apartments, large pieces of the street are still missing because of the deluge of water.

“That I know of, there was no city resources to help,” Ulrickson said. “But they said 10 years ago, this would only happen once every 100 years [...] Their infrastructure needs help, needs to be redone.”

Trintje Nordlie has lived on North Cedar Street for 36 years. She remembers the last flood of this size a decade ago.

“Why is it that every 10 years, we get a waterfall down this road?” Nordlie asked. “Canton is not really wanting a swimming pool, they want these streets fixed.”

The city of Canton broke ground on its outdoor swimming pool project in 2023, which has an estimated value of \$6.8 million according to Construction Journal.

During the torrential rainfall in June, Nordlie and her husband were up all night trying to get the rainwater and sewage out of their basement. She said she had not received any guidance from the city.

“They just tell you, ‘Oh, you can do it on your own.’ Well, you can’t do it on your own,” Nordlie said, though she did not specify who told her.

Meanwhile, volunteer firefighters went home to home throughout the city in the immediate days after, using smaller diversion pumps to help residents push water out of their homes to street drains, with at least one instance taking three to five hours alone.

In a City Commission meeting on Aug. 5, 2024, more than a month later, the commissioners passed a motion to have an engineer look at North Cedar Street and determine the best way to avoid flooding during future natural disaster events.

Canton resident Miranda Oien said the city had helped residents by allowing damaged belongings to be brought to the high school parking lot to be disposed of by the city.

But even this initiative was originally started by Canton resident Joseph Kumlien, after he found out that the roads to the City of Canton rubble site were flooded with water.

Oien said the city neglected to update its natural disaster emergency plan, which hadn’t been updated since 2003. A public letter from Mayor Sandi Lundstrom on June 27 to residents

confirmed this, with the understanding the city would be conducting an evaluation of areas where the city fell short and creating an action plan to improve the "community's readiness for future events."

"This isn't the first time this kind of flood has happened," Kumlien said. "It was really crazy, the amount of non-plan that they had in place for a big flood."

On Holiday Drive, water rushed down the sloped street and into residents' houses, while water from the small lake behind them simultaneously spilled over into their backyards.

Jason Steinmetz's home on Holiday Drive filled with 3 feet of water. His two teenage children had to park their cars on the street during the flood, and both cars were totaled from water damage.

Almost two months later, his two teenagers are still living out of plastic boxes in their basement, where the sheetrock, carpeting and bathroom all needed to be replaced.

Steinmetz and his wife are both teachers, so they have been watching YouTube tutorials and restoring their house at night after work.

"We have three kids, so we didn't have, you know, a ton of extra money to be throwing at redoing all that stuff," he said. "Plus, we're replacing cars."

More: 'Not much sleep:' Residents share stories of flooding impact

The Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA, offers resources and compensation for survivors of disasters after a major disaster declaration has been declared.

In a Aug. 15 press release, President Joe Biden signed off on a major disaster declaration for South Dakota after Gov. Kristi Noem formally requested one on July 26 for 25 counties in with severe flood damage, including Lincoln County, where Canton is the seat.

Several Canton residents, including Steinmetz, reported that FEMA stopped by to look at their homes in early August, but they haven't heard anything more. As of Monday, FEMA inspectors were finally starting to conduct damage inspections in Canton homes, along with other surrounding areas affected.

"You didn't really hear much, you know, from the mayor on what's going on," Steinmetz said as of Tuesday. "My wife had to get on the Facebook page and be like, 'Hey, did anyone hear that FEMA was in town?'"

Amy Bergren lives on South Pleasant Street, where she and her neighbors have had multiple sewage backups in their homes in the past month and a half.

Residents of Pleasant Street cannot drink their tap water, which is often brown and smells like sewage, but they still have to wash their dishes with the water and bathe in it.

After the flooding in June, Bergren said her family had to use the bathroom outside for eight days. The city did not provide any portable toilets or other restroom options for them.

Canton was on wastewater restrictions for about six days following the flooding because of sewer backup and water system issues. And in the time since, the city has experienced at least five or six water main breaks and two or three water service disruptions.

As of Wednesday morning, Canton residents were alerted by the city they may notice a loss of water pressure due to water tower maintenance. Pressure was expected to resume when maintenance was complete.

But Bergren said her neighbor's dogs are getting sick from the sewage backups. Another neighbor has three kids, who are all starting their school year sleeping on air mattresses upstairs after their basement filled with sewage.

"It's just been a nightmare, like one thing after another. We can't leave our homes without wondering if we're gonna come home to a mess," Bergren said. "We're tired of the city not taking accountability."

More: Canton, South Dakota mayor promises change after residents criticize flood response

A construction project on Pleasant Street is intended to provide new sewer lines, storm sewers and water mains. Bergren said she was told by city commissioners that the project would be done by Oct. 13.

The sewage backup within the last week on South Pleasant Street was accidentally caused by the construction company working on the street.

However, Bergren said the construction company took accountability for the backup and paid for a cleaning company to clean the basements of those affected.

The city did not provide sanitation resources to the residents on Pleasant Street after the first few sewage backups. In a statement released on Aug. 9 to DakotaNewsNow, Lundstrom said

these backups were caused by old infrastructure that couldn't handle the large amounts of water entering its system after the flood.

"This has been an ongoing problem for years," Lundstrom wrote.

Bergren said that during the flood, Canton needed a city administrator who would work directly with residents to handle financial and utility issues like this.

City commissioner Paul Garbers echoed this sentiment on June 24 at a City Commission meeting, where Canton residents expressed their anger at the lack of flood planning and resources.

"We need an administrator in this town to get the s--t done," Garbers said, to applause from residents in the crowd at the meeting. "I am ready to be done (on the commission), because it sure ain't worth the \$2,000."

Lundstrom responded to this critique via the June letter to the public posted to Canton's website, where she wrote:

"Given the current natural disaster, it has become clear to me that our city requires the expertise of a qualified city administrator now instead of later [...] I will collaborate with city officials, commissioners, staff and community leaders to create a proposal for hiring a dedicated professional city administrator."

In following Canton City Commission meetings, residents have asked for a better city communication policy so that they don't have to find all their information through social media

"I don't know what else they want us to do," Bergren said. "We're financially drained. We're exhausted, because we are constantly cleaning up a mess that we shouldn't have to clean up."

Lundstrom declined to comment and city officials have not responded after multiple attempts to reach out.

A message from the mayor

