



Onion Creek Floodplain and Flood Mitigation Study Questions from Community

Project Timeline

- What is your timeline to present a schedule and begin work on land to prevent flooding?
- When will we have a final decision on which plan of action will be taken by the City of Austin for flood mitigation for the Upper Onion Creek Subdivision? What will the time table be for that plan of action?
- Those that have been flooded feel trapped. No one will buy our homes and we cannot afford to leave and purchase another home. How many more years before we might have decisions and answers? Every time it rains, we are all scared - worried our lives and loved ones are in danger.

We'd like to start off by saying that you are not alone in having these feelings. Central Texas has had such devastating floods in the past couple of years. We have also heard from other people, both along Onion Creek and other creeks, about how traumatic this flooding has been and how they are scared every time it rains. The process to evaluate, design, fund, and construct an effective solution takes a significant amount of time, and we realize that this can be frustrating. We wish we could solve the flooding problems more quickly and help bring you peace of mind.

The feasibility study should be completed in the late spring or summer of 2017. Once the feasibility study is completed, the Watershed Protection Department will make a recommendation about what solution to implement and how to fund it. It may take years to fund the solution.

With the exception of buyouts, the solutions will need to be designed and permitted and funding identified prior to construction of the project. The design and permitting process will likely take at least five years and the identification of funding could take even longer. If the recommended solution includes buyouts, implementation could begin sooner as there won't be a need for design and permitting. However, the implementation would still be dependent on project funding.

In the meantime, we encourage everyone who lives in a floodplain to have a plan in place should flooding conditions be expected. Generally in Austin, flooded roadways pose the most significant risk.

You can check [ATXfloods](#) for road closures and [ATXHydromet](#) for rainfall and stream level information. Sign up for [ATXfloods Alerts](#) to have important flood-related messages sent to your email address or cell phone. A NOAA All Hazards Weather Radio will also alert you to flood warnings and evacuations. In addition, local TV and radio stations often keep you posted during flooding conditions.

If water in the creek rises and begins to spill over the banks, keep monitoring the situation and get ready to potentially evacuate or move to the second floor or roof. The flooding may get much worse very fast. In Austin, our creeks can rise several feet in just a few minutes. Keep in mind that the road providing access to your home may become impassible before water enters your house. Leave before the road is flooded. Do not attempt to drive or walk through a flooded road.

Please keep in mind that in the Upper Onion Creek area, the houses are unlikely to flood in smaller storms. It takes a significant amount of rain to cause flooding.

Buyout Process

- If and when property buyouts are considered and become effective, when will homeowners be notified and what would the payout timeline look like?
- What is included? Will they be held-up while like housing is found as was done in lower Onion Creek?
- If a buyout or flood wall is chosen, what is the buyout process?
- Has the City of Austin secured funding for the buyout of the existing 10 homes in Upper Onion Creek that were declared substantially damaged in 2013 and 2015?
- Can additional details in regard to the flood wall option be provided? We would like to know about possible timing, how prices for buyouts are determined, actual process that would be implemented if this option is selected.

In general, we follow the same process for buyouts whether they are needed to implement another solution, such as a flood wall, or whether we are pursuing them as a solution for flooding on their own.

Once a buyout project has been established for a certain area and the funding is in place, we will either hold a neighborhood meeting or send letters with an overview of the process. The first step for each homeowner is an individual meeting with our buyout staff. During this one-on-one meeting, the process will be discussed in detail, the homeowners can get many of their questions answered and our staff can learn more about each family's particular needs as they relate to the buyout.

After meeting with the homeowner, we will arrange for an independent appraisal to determine the property's fair market value. Fair market value is the amount that a willing buyer would pay to a willing seller and will be based on the

condition of the home at the time the appraisal is conducted. This value will be the basis for our offer. If the property owner accepts the offer, they or their tenants may also be eligible for “relocation benefits,” additional financial assistance to help secure replacement housing. Please note, however, that the acquisition and relocation benefits must be approved by City Council.

Generally, we cannot offer buyouts to everyone all at once, but must work with a limited number of homeowners at a time. How long it takes us to meet with everyone depends on the number of properties, the amount of funding available for the project, the availability of comparable replacement housing on the market, as well as the availability of staff or contractors to support the project.

Currently, there is only funding available to buy two, possibly three homes that were flooded in 2013 and 2015. These buyouts are separate from the buyout option under consideration as part of the feasibility study. The current buyouts, called recovery buyouts, are being prioritized based on risk of flooding and date of ownership of the house with the focus being on residents who have owned their home since before the October 2013 flood.

Channel Clearing

- Are you going to clean out the creek?
- How much environmental impact (wildlife habitat) will take place as a result of the proposed channel clearing? Is that the most difficult to achieve proposal?
- Is channel clearing/benching in Wild Dunes cul-de-sac and Shinnecock area possible?
- Was/will any work be done on clearing the Slaughter-Onion confluence?
- Why is the City of Austin not interested in clearing out built-up debris along the length of Onion Creek through our community?
- Will any clearing be done to improve flow in Slaughter Creek?

The effectiveness of clearing vegetation from the channel and/or modifying the channel in various locations is being considered as part of the ongoing feasibility study. The areas under consideration include the confluence of Onion Creek with Slaughter Creek, the Wild Dunes cul-de-sac and the Shinnecock areas, among many others parts of the channel and floodplain in the Onion Creek community.

Each of the mitigation options has unique challenges, and they are all difficult to implement in their own ways. Clearing the length of the channel and portions of the floodplain, even without modifying it, is a major endeavor. Some of the challenges include acquiring easements from a large number of homeowners, finding a way to access the creek in various locations with heavy equipment and removing many protected trees. There would be significant impact to wildlife habitat and considerable mitigation costs associated with removal of the trees. The easements are necessary since most of the Onion Creek floodplain is on private property through the Onion Creek neighborhood with only limited

easements. We do not have the right to access or maintain the creek without an easement.

In addition, we need to consider whether the clearing would cause erosion or degrade the water quality. The vegetation targeted for removal is currently helping to protect homeowners against erosion and filter pollution from the creek.

Another consideration is the long-term effort and cost required to maintain the cleared conditions so that the vegetation does not slowly return.

Mitigation Options

- What likelihood is there of using the Centex Quarry to divert flood waters?
- It seems as if a combination of the ponds and dam/levee construction proposals would be most effective and feasible. How likely is it that a combination of proposals will be the chosen solution?
- How will the mitigation efforts in this neighborhood affect downstream neighborhoods closer to McKinney Falls State Park?

The effectiveness of each mitigation option as well as a combination of options are being evaluated as part of the ongoing feasibility study. It is likely that we will recommend some combination of strategies.

As with any project implemented by the Watershed Protection Department, there will be no adverse flooding impact to properties upstream or downstream. We evaluate preliminary solutions for any potential increase in flow or flood level both upstream and downstream of the project area. If any potential increase in flow is identified, additional measures are then incorporated into the solution to offset the increased flow and ensure that flooding does not become worse for anyone else as a result of the project.

It is not clear yet whether or not any of the detention ponds will ultimately be recommended as part of the overall mitigation strategy for this area. Certainly proposed ponds in other jurisdictions and/or on private property will require coordination and discussions with those entities.

Storm Drain Systems

- Is there any plan for storm water drainage improvements in the Onion Creek subdivision especially at 10240 Pinehurst Dr.?

Austin has more than 1,000 miles of storm drain pipes and more than 30,000 storm drain inlets. With this much pipe, we must carefully prioritize which ones are upgraded based on the frequency and severity of flooding and/or the condition of the pipes.

Our current code calls for storm drain pipes to be able to handle a 100-year storm or 10 inches of rain spread across 24 hours. The Halloween Flood of 2015

exceeded this amount of rain in the Onion Creek area. Even Austin's newest pipes that conform to current code would not have been able to handle this rainfall.

The City of Austin's Watershed Protection Department currently does not have any storm drain improvement project planned for your area. The limited funding and resources that we have to address flooding issues throughout the City require us to prioritize our needs and mitigate the more severe problems first. However, we encourage you to report any drainage concerns to 3-1-1, so we have a record of it when we are prioritizing projects.

Erosion Project

- What was all that work that was done behind 10210 Pinehurst?

A gully on the creek's south bank in this area was eroding. The Watershed Protection Department stabilized 175 feet of the gully by using boulders, slope grading and native grasses. We also removed some flood-related debris along the access way.

Lower Onion Creek

- What is the City going to do about maintaining the Yarrabee Bend area? Piles of downed trees are still everywhere and piles of debris have been dumped. 311 has been non-responsive.

In the Lower Onion Creek project area, near William Cannon and S. Pleasant Valley, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is in the design phase for recreational facilities on the land that has been acquired in their partnership with the City. Those recreational facilities are expected to be constructed within the next few years.

Once the buyouts outside of the Army Corps partnership area are complete, the City will work with residents in the area to explore options for community gardens, rain gardens, additional passive recreation features, wildflower meadows, or other uses that are desirable in the area and compatible with the floodplain.

Flood Gate Operations

- Will the future draining of Lake Travis or Town Lake effect flooding on Onion Creek?

The LCRA has been lowering the levels of Lake Austin and Lake LBJ in January. These two lakes were lowered gradually over the course of several days, and it did not cause any flooding. During storms, the operation of flood gates along the

Colorado River does not have any impact on Onion Creek except the most downstream portions near Highway 71 and Texas 130.

Bonds

- The Transportation Department began promoting the mobility bond in March. Why not the Watershed Protection?
- Why didn't Watershed advocate to be included in the 2016 bond election so citizens could choose between transportation and flooding?

Decisions about what to place in bond packages and when to hold bond elections are made by the City Council. Once a bond has been proposed, by state law, City departments may not advocate for or against it, but only provide factual information. In the case of the mobility bond, it was the Mayor's Office who initiated the bond and advocated for it.

On August 11, 2016, the City Council passed a resolution establishing a bond oversight committee and calling for the development of a bond package for the 2017 or 2018 ballot. Flood mitigation is explicitly mentioned in this resolution. The Watershed Protection Department is actively engaged in identifying our funding needs for this effort. You can stay up to date on the bond development process at www.austintexas.gov/bondoversight. Here is a link to the resolution: <http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/edims/document.cfm?id=261950>.

Home repairs and interim measures

- We recognize that mitigation activities will take time to plan, budget, and implement. In the interim period, until any effective mitigation is implemented, what is the City of Austin's (Watershed's) plan in the event that we are flooded again? When the next flood event happens, most of the flooded properties will have to be declared substantially damaged and will then be subject to FEMA's ICC policy. In effect, those homeowners will be unable to re-insure for flood insurance until the property is brought into "compliance". Since most of the compliance criteria are impractical, this puts those homeowners and properties at risk of total financial loss unless there is a plan to back them up. One only has to look at what happened to the communities impacted by Hurricane Sandy. After the second flood of 2015, there have been many attempts by flood victims to sell their homes and move out of harm's way. Virtually no one has been able to sell their homes because the Realtors now view this area as "toxic". And, rightfully so, until a real plan to stop flooding is put into action. Even some homeowners (wishing to sell) who did not flood have been affected by this. While all of Austin is growing and appreciating, we are essentially trapped, with depressed property values, unable to sell, and at risk of future damage and potential loss of life. What can be done to address this issue?
- What are the rules for those homeowners who were affected by one or

both floods with regard to improving/repairing their properties? And, how will fair property valuations be determined should a future buyout be part of the mitigation strategy?

Thank you for recognizing that the mitigation activities will take time. We appreciate your understanding!

We encourage owners of properties that were impacted by a flood to speak with our Floodplain Office before applying for a permit to make repairs. The Floodplain Office will discuss previous damage to the building, floodplain regulations, and allowable repairs and improvements. The Floodplain Office can be reached at 512-974-2843 or floodpro@austintexas.gov.

As far as the regulations are concerned, Austin prohibits “substantial improvement” in a floodplain without bringing the house or business into compliance with floodplain regulations. FEMA requires us to have this type of rule as a condition of making flood insurance and disaster assistance available to Austin residents. Substantial improvement is defined as repairs or improvements that cost more than 50% of the value of the structure. The costs are calculated cumulatively over a 10-year period.

After the Halloween Flood of 2015, the City Council made a special exception to the cumulative damage provision of the City code so that the costs of the 2013 and 2015 floods were not combined in the calculation of substantial damage. However, there is no guarantee that the City Council would do the same thing if the area were to flood again within the next few years.

Homeowners with substantial damage from the 2013 and 2015 floods were issued life/safety permits to make the house livable. Since we are planning a flood mitigation project, we have worked with FEMA to extend the deadline for compliance with the floodplain regulations until we have the results of the feasibility study and a recommended solution. If there is another flood before the project is completed, it is likely that a similar process would be followed.

FEMA’s Increased Cost of Compliance (ICC) program provides up to \$30,000 to assist a property owner in bringing their home into compliance with the local floodplain regulations.

Buyout offers are based on fair market value based on the condition of the house at the time of the appraisal. Homeowners may also be eligible for relocation benefits. We want our buyout projects to be successful, so it is important for us that homeowners receive a fair offer and receive any relocation benefits needed to move to a safer home.

Dripping Springs and Wastewater Effluent

- Is dumping into Onion Creek ultimately likely to be allowed?
- Is the Dripping Springs pond tied in any way to the dumping into the creek that was discussed last week in Dripping Springs?
- What is the City's response to Dripping Springs wanting to dump sewage in Onion Creek?
- What restrictions are in place to limit effluent from Buda going into Onion Creek?

Any proposed stormwater detention ponds for flood mitigation are not part of the City of Drippings Springs' proposed wastewater effluent discharge permit.

Since the City of Dripping Springs' originally proposed discharging wastewater effluent into Onion Creek, the City of Austin has been proactively working with them and other stakeholders to identify alternatives. We have successfully initiated a rule-making action at the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality to make land application of wastewater effluent more cost-effective and flexible. The City of Austin has also collected site-specific data, calibrated water quality simulation models for Onion Creek, and submitted comments to TCEQ on the proposed wastewater effluent discharge permit.

Although the ultimate outcome is unknown, the City of Austin has requested a contested case hearing on the City of Dripping Springs' wastewater effluent discharge permit to the TCEQ. In the meantime, we continue discussions with Dripping Springs to find an operational strategy that protects Onion Creek water quality.

As far as Buda is concerned, the City of Buda does not currently have and is not currently seeking a permit to discharge wastewater effluent into Onion Creek. Buda would need to apply for a permit from the TCEQ prior to any discharge.

Development and the Regional Stormwater Management Program

- How will Onion Creek Flood Mitigation be impacted by the aggressive population growth and development described by the Austin Mayor during the traffic funding discussions?
- How will the new developments such as Goodnight affect Onion Creek?
- Subdivisions being built that affect the Slaughter and Onion Creek flood areas need to abide by drainage/flooding laws along with contractors!
- Why is the developer of the area known as "Rattlesnake Flats" within the OC neighborhood parlanace allowed to just pay a fee and not build retention ponds?
- When new housing developments do not build "retention ponds" but simply pay flood money to the city, why can't these funds be tapped for flood mitigation?

To map the floodplain, we consider the amount of rainfall that runs off of all the land that drains to Onion Creek. We consider the amount of rainfall both based on the amount of impervious cover (roads, buildings, parking lots, etc.) at the time of the study and also based on the maximum amount of impervious cover expected in the future, given the land use regulations for the area. This results in two separate floodplain maps.

The FEMA floodplain map is based on the existing conditions while the City's regulatory floodplain map is based on the fully-developed or future conditions. In the case of the Onion Creek, the floodplain based on fully-developed conditions is not much larger than the floodplain based on existing conditions. This means that future development in the Onion Creek watershed is unlikely to worsen flooding significantly, unless cities or counties allow developments to exceed the current restrictions on impervious cover.

The City's development regulations require developers to prove that their projects will not cause adverse impacts to other properties either adjacent to theirs or to those farther upstream or downstream. In the upper portions of a watershed, detention ponds are typically required to ensure that post-development flows do not increase. In the lower portions of a watershed, it is often more beneficial to allow the water from a development to flow out more quickly so that it does not combine with the flows from farther upstream in the watershed. In these cases, the Regional Stormwater Management Program (RSMP) may allow the payment of a fee in place of on-site detention.

In order to participate in the RSMP, a developer must be able to prove that the flows from their property do not cause adverse impacts and that the downstream drainage system has sufficient capacity to handle the flows. The fees collected by the program may be used for land acquisition; design, permitting and construction of regional pond facilities; property buyouts; culvert upgrades; storm drain improvements; channel modifications; and watershed master plans. The RSMP funds are used for projects within the watershed for which they are collected.

We're happy to answer any other questions that you have!

512-974-2843

(Please leave a message and a staff member will call you back)

FloodPro@austintexas.gov

www.austintexas.gov/onioncreekstudy