

Where Do We Go Now?



In late October, Superstorm Sandy hammered the East Coast with flooding and high winds, causing billions of dollars in damages—and the human impact of such a storm is horrifying. Millions of residents were left without power and heat for weeks; there were food and gas shortages; and many people lost all or part of their homes. The large-scale implications of a storm like Sandy are varied and great.

The Gowanus Canal, a former dumping ground for raw sewage and industrial waste and now a Superfund site, flooded parts of Brooklyn—which is nothing new

to residents of the area, who often experience flooding after even a rainstorm, when the local sewer system overflows into the canal because of storm runoff. This is just one example of the flooding New York experienced, and highlights the need—not just in New York, but across the country—for tightened regulatory attention to storm water management and flooding, especially in the case of industrial runoff.

The flooding also called attention to the state of the nation's infrastructure. There were reports of sewer overflows from Connecticut to Maryland—spilling sewage, into the hundreds of thousands of gallons, into roads and bodies of water—and even before the storm hit, newspapers as far north as Syracuse, N.Y., and Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, were expressing fears that the cities' already overtaxed sewer systems would not be able to handle the predicted rainfall.

The problem, of course, is finding the money to build—although it is out there. New York City's Green Infrastructure Plan combined city and state funding with new storm water charges to stand-alone parking lots. Public-private partnerships are another way to fund improvements like this, as is adding storm water fees to water bills. Philadelphia recently came up with a formula by which to calculate a storm water fee; it takes into account the gross area of the property as well as the impervious area.

Perhaps the most vital of Sandy's lessons is that it is getting harder and harder to ignore climate change. Hurricanes thrive on warmer ocean temperatures and high humidity, both of which have increased in recent years. Likewise, Sandy's storm surges rode on sea levels that have risen over the last century. There is an increased likelihood of severe storms—and the devastation associated with them—in the future.

So what happens next? How do we build and update infrastructure despite a funding scarcity, while also trying to mitigate the effects of climate change and ensure that our waters do not become contaminated from polluted runoff? I don't think there is any one answer to that—but I do think that by keeping our minds and eyes open, educating our legislators and the public, and combining resources and ideas, we can figure out how to survive and thrive for generations to come.

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