

Weekend Perspectives: The floods this time

Environmental degradation and development made matters worse

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The extensive flooding in southwestern Pennsylvania should remind us that, as with global warming, our public policy and human activity can have a hand in making problems more severe. It should also serve to forewarn us that choosing leaders who place profits for real estate speculation above the health, safety and welfare of people who live in traditional towns such as Etna, Millvale and Carnegie will only set the stage for more and greater disasters in the future.

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I first became aware of the problem after nine people lost their lives in a 1986 flash flood along Pine Creek above Etna. A county study later found that the severity was a result of the straightening and channeling of streams, the filling of wetlands and flood plains and increases in impervious surface area. The years following brought a significant increase in these activities in the North Hills with the construction boom from the opening of I-279, and they were rampant throughout the region.

While this may have had little role in last week's river flooding, it is likely a factor in the severity of the preceding stream flooding which accompanied it, causing the most damage and one death.

Before public outrage builds that nobody was doing anything, it is

important to understand that some tried.

Shortly after becoming the executive director of the North Area Environmental Council in 1989, I learned from U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife that the protection of wetlands and streams in our region, under the jurisdiction of the Army Corps of Engineers, was considered the worst in the country. Unfortunately, EPA and USFW couldn't expose the problem because of bureaucratic protocol. A congressional inquiry would enable them to drop everything, investigate and reply, but they needed someone who could initiate it.

Though multiple calls and visits to U.S. Rep. Doug Walgren's office were fruitless, a brief discussion with Teresa Heinz in August 1990 produced an inquiry from Sen. John Heinz within a couple of weeks. A joint agency investigation followed and I assisted as chair of E Watch, a group dedicated to environmental monitoring and compliance. The investigation looked at numerous sites in the Pine Creek and Lowries Run watersheds, many with violations committed by municipalities and public authorities. The findings which resulted were described by Sen. Heinz's aide, John Verbanic, as the strongest possible criticism of one federal agency by another.

The head of the local Army Corps of Engineers' Regulatory Branch immediately retired. Sen. Heinz was furious on learning that the Corps was promoting someone from the local office rather than bring change by transferring somebody from an area with effective enforcement. Tragically, the senator came to his untimely death on April 5, 1991, a few days before he intended to act, losing the region its best chance to remedy the problem. The file on the joint investigation moved to Sen. Arlen Specter and then Sen. Harris Wofford, but nothing ever happened.

In the years since Sen. Heinz's death, the protection of wetlands and streams throughout our region has been marginal, at best. The problematic activities identified in the 1990 investigation have multiplied. Even where the agencies have tried, their hands are tied -- what were once violations based upon legitimate scientific standards have become permitted acts of environmental destruction as a matter of federal policy. Unfortunately, the wanton rejection of good science continues in the Bush administration.

Would we have had flooding from Ivan if good science had been followed

for environmental policy and we had effective enforcement? Yes, but the destruction of property and lives would likely be less.



So what do we do now? Our primary problem is not technological. Our increased storm runoff, along with a litany of other problems, stems in largest part from suburban sprawl. It has caused our region to experience one of the highest rates of land consumption in the country amid a continuing decline in population -- between 1970 and 1990 alone we lost 11 percent in population while using 30 percent more land area. In nearly all cases, the new uses absorb less rainfall than natural habitat or agriculture.

The current flood control strategy is almost entirely based upon requiring stormwater detention ponds for new construction. These may produce some benefit within a range of conditions, but there are limits and they cannot entirely make up for other environmental abuses.

With a great deal of campaign funding coming from real estate speculation interests of one type or another, it is no wonder that our government has gone to great lengths to subsidize and stimulate sprawl while decrying its problems. The biggest subsidies come as the construction of highways and new utility infrastructure designed to stimulate sprawl.

Proposals for better land use controls are like trying to close the barn door after the horse got out. Not only do they not work, they more often exacerbate the problem. The solution for sprawl is not to shackle property owners with ineffective zoning, which only pushes uses outward like bumpers on a pinball machine.

I'm not suggesting forcing people to live where they don't want, but offering real, quality alternatives that can result in a phenomenon called "unsprawl" -- not slowing or stopping sprawl, but producing a net inward movement that effectively reverses it. We have a huge excess of capacity in our existing traditional communities which is more than enough if restored and enhanced rather than torn down to make way for more subsidized real estate speculation.

It can be done. While the details are beyond the scope of this article, the

biggest part is to simply stop doing the wrong things, whether subsidizing real estate speculation or ignoring good environmental science and putting profits before public safety. Whatever else we may need to do is minimal in comparison, and, best yet, won't be undermined before we start.

Our first step, then, is to look for leaders who are committed to a scientific basis for environmental policy and to supporting restoration and reuse of our traditional communities. The alternative would be keeping leaders who refuse to change and creating more and greater tragedies in our future.

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