

U.S.

Flooded Again, a Houston Neighborhood Faces a Wrenching Choice

After three floods in three years, Meyerland, a thriving community of 2,300 homes, weighs deep ties against risks of rebuilding

By Bradley Olson, Dan Frosch and Lynn Cook

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HOUSTON— Chris Bisel sat next to his son in a grocery store parking lot Saturday night, hoping the rising waters would recede enough for him to reach his wife, Jamie, who was trapped in their home. He was stunned. It was happening again.

Harvey was deluging one of the most flood-prone major cities in the country with the heaviest rains ever recorded in the continental U.S. And for the third year in a row, flooding would wreak havoc on his home in Meyerland, a neighborhood of about 2,300 homes on the city's southwest side.

The floods, after years without problems, are making Mr. Bisel and others question the viability of their homes and deep attachment to neighborhoods where they made their lives. Houston's plight is an extreme example of what is being felt in communities around the country, bedeviling politicians and city planners as well as homeowners, as areas become more flood-prone and damaging storms increase in frequency.

Mr. Bisel's 3,800-square-foot ranch-style home was set to be raised 5 feet with about \$350,000 in financial aid he was receiving through a federal grant program. But the work hadn't started yet; he had lost a race against time.

"My friends say, 'Why do you stay if it keeps flooding?' " said Mr. Bisel, 48. "I try to explain that this is my home, this is where I grew up, and it didn't used to be this way, at least not this bad."

Similar stories played out in homes, businesses and places of worship all along the Meyerland neighborhood near Brays Bayou, one of the swampy waterways that course through the city and serve as the primary conduits to carry runoff to the Gulf of Mexico. Many in the swollen bayou's path are now pondering the same question: Is it time to leave for good?



Chris Bisel cleaned up his daughter's room on Thursday. PHOTO: ANNIE MULLIGAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Known as the Bayou City, Houston has long favored rapid development

and maintaining a low cost of living. It doesn't have a formal zoning code, which some cities use to force builders to incorporate flood-management measures. Large-scale planning is complicated by the city's sprawling 10,000-square-mile metro area, nearly the size of Massachusetts, home to almost seven million people.

Houston and Harris County, where it is located, have passed referendums to fund drainage projects, moved to widen waterways, boosted deed restrictions and planning regulations, and even required new houses in certain areas such as Meyerland to be built to withstand rising water. Some of the measures have worked. But it hasn't been enough.

"They've been playing catch up," said Philip Bedient, an engineering professor and flooding expert at Rice University in Houston. "It's all sorry, a day late and a dollar short."



Flood-damaged furniture, floors and sheet rock heaped along the sidewalk in Meyerland. PHOTO: ANNIE MULLIGAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

In London, massive flood gates on the Thames can rise during a storm surge and hold back water. New York City has spent years deliberating whether to follow London's lead and build storm barriers for the Hudson and East rivers.

From Florida to the Netherlands, deep water catchment systems paired with storm water pumps allow flat areas to withstand drenching rains by slowly releasing the water over time to prevent floods. The Houston area doesn't have pumps.

New Orleans had storm water pumps before Hurricane Katrina, although the anti-flooding safeguards were destroyed when levees broke, killing about 1,400 of the total of more than 1,800 who died from the storm, and showing the perils of underfunding critical infrastructure.

Houston's disaster will intensify a debate that is already upending insurance markets and worrying federal officials, whose coffers are increasingly tapped to pay for calamities. The U.S. has seen 20 storms causing a billion dollars or more in damage since 2010, not including Harvey, compared with nine billion-dollar floods in the full decade of the 1980s, according to inflation-adjusted estimates from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

One option for preventing future superfloods would be radical reconstruction, a move that would likely force the government into battles with private property owners. After Katrina, Louisiana officials tried to tell flooded homeowners not to rebuild in some areas, but the instructions were ignored.

In the case of Meyerland, Mr. Bedient said the government should buy out thrice-flooded homeowners and use the land to create more detention ponds and widen storm channels. Farther upstream, at least three new reservoirs should be constructed west of Houston, and the existing two reservoirs, which were built in the 1940s and which engineers say could be at risk of failing, should be upgraded, he said.

That said, Houston's flat landscape and hardpan clay makes it nearly impossible to absorb intense rainfall the way geographies with sandier soil do. And 50 inches of rain would swamp virtually any U.S. city. "It was an outrageous storm event," he said. "We've never seen anything like this."

Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner rejected the notion that the city's flood-control efforts and approach to zoning and planning were to blame. "You cannot significantly mitigate flooding and drainage on the cheap," the mayor said. "And a lot of people don't want to pay, but you're going to pay sooner or later."

Meyerland, built on former rice fields, has for decades served as the center of Jewish life in Houston, a place where families who felt unwelcome elsewhere due to their religion forged a community of their own.

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Today, Meyerland remains one of Houston's most desirable family neighborhoods, with high-performing public schools and lush parks. It is increasingly diverse, like much of the city—one of America's most ethnically multifaceted places, with immigrants who speak more than 140 languages.

Mr. Bisel, whose hearing-aid business in Meyerland also took on 28 inches of water, bought his current home three weeks before Tropical Storm Allison, the plodding 2001 rainstorm that until Harvey served as the high-water mark for modern Houston flooding.

The house took in about 10 inches of water then. Like most Houstonians, Mr. Bisel thought that was a once-in-a-lifetime event, until it happened in 2015, 2016 and again this week.



An image on Mr. Bisel's phone showed water from the Memorial Day Flood in 2015 inside his house. PHOTO: ANNIE MULLIGAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

After the 2015 flood, which took place around Memorial Day and poured 34 inches of water into his house, he was among several dozen residents approved to receive federal grant funds aimed at reducing repeat flood insurance claims by tunneling under homes and raising them on pillars.

Since the government is likely to have to pay for catastrophic flood damage anyway, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has sought to pay to shore up homes against flooding instead of the \$350,000 it can cost to rebuild them.

Mr. Bisel was hopeful his home could be raised before the next big flood. But the construction faced chronic delays, he said. After living in one second-floor room with his wife, two children and a dog for nearly a year during renovations, he settled back into the full home in April 2016 after most of the rebuilding work was completed, while he waited along with about 40 others for their houses to be raised.

Less than two weeks later, another storm, dubbed the Tax Day Flood, inundated his house with 20 inches. He pressed the city to move more quickly.

This July, the Houston City Council approved the elevation plans for the first batch of homes being raised with FEMA money. But Mr. Bisel was in the second batch, 14th on the list. As he saw the forecast for Harvey last week, he feared he had run out of time. He, his wife and son went through the now-familiar ritual of moving their furniture and treasured belongings to higher ground.



Jamie Bisel hugged her daughter, Reagan, on Thursday in an upstairs room of their house. PHOTO: ANNIE MULLIGAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By the time Harvey was done dumping trillions of gallons over the Houston area, forcing his wife to escape in a kayak, his home had taken on 55 inches of water. That would have been 5 inches short of his first floor if his house had been raised. Neighbors who had elevated their homes earlier with their own money stayed dry.

More than 700,000 people live near Brays Bayou, which meanders through Meyerland, draining 127 square miles around it. A \$500 million city project aimed at reducing flooding was under way on another part of the bayou when Harvey hit.

Lined with hiking and biking trails, the waterway winds past many areas that have seen rapid urbanization, including NRG Stadium, where the Houston Texans play; the Texas Medical Center, the largest collection of hospitals and health-care research institutions in the world; and Beth Israel, the oldest synagogue in Texas.

Beth Israel, which sits across the street from the bayou, began taking on water Sunday for the third time in three years. When Rabbi David Lyon walked into the sanctuary Monday morning, he said he took a long look around and began to weep. About 3 feet of floodwater had risen to the platform where he gives his sermons.

The synagogue, which dates to the 1850s, has been at its Meyerland location since 1968. A staple of the community, it never flooded before 2015. After Harvey, cleanup crews and volunteers on Wednesday cleared floodwater with heavy equipment. The synagogue's Torahs had been safely carried to higher ground inside the building in advance of the storm.



Beth Israel, which sits across the street from the bayou, began taking on water Sunday for the third time in three years. PHOTO: ANNIE MULLIGAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Following the 2015 floods, the synagogue laid plans to install new carpets and re-wallpaper, and began consulting with waterproofing experts. It put off a \$300,000 remodel until November of 2016, nervous about more flooding.

Rabbi Lyon said he realizes that the question of whether Beth Israel should move is now likely “in the back of people’s minds.”

“There are people who say ‘Why do you stay in Meyerland?’ ” he said. “The reality is, where we’re located is a very central Jewish address. Many people centralize their life around this area.”

More pointedly, he noted that people had settled here long before the flooding problems started.

“Families have every right to say, ‘We chose these homes not yesterday, but years and years ago,’ ” said Rabbi Lyon, 54. “What’s different? What changed?”

That was the question Ian Hartman had to confront as water began seeping into his home through a rear door soon after the storm began.

The three-bedroom ranch-style home, which Mr. Hartman and his wife, Rachel, bought five years ago, had never flooded before, a fact he had always taken comfort in. Just in case, the 35-year-old homeowner had installed a new drainage system and gutters.

But as the water leached in, eventually rising to 7 inches, he knew none of it had made any difference. The Hartmans were able to move some valuable items off the floor, but there hadn't been much time.



Catastrophe adjuster Ian Richardson spoke to Ian Hartman on Thursday. PHOTO: ANNIE MULLIGAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

On Wednesday, Mr. Hartman, who had grown up in the area, and a group of childhood friends hauled out waterlogged couches, bed frames and boxes of Legos, lugging the ruined items across floor boards warped by floodwater.

A flood-insurance adjuster was set to visit later in the week. However the financial situation turned out, Mr. Hartman had made up his mind: He no longer wanted to live in the house and planned to put it on the market as soon as they repaired the damage.

“Something’s not right,” said Mr. Hartman, a buyer for Texas Direct Auto, a car dealership. “If you think about it, we’re right here on the bayou, and they keep building around the city, just adding more concrete. If they don’t increase the height or the depth of the bayou, it’s just going to happen again.”

Though he was ready to leave, he didn’t want to abandon Meyerland altogether—and didn’t know if there was any real escape from flooding anyway.

“Where are you going to go? Clear Lake City flooded. Baytown flooded. Pasadena flooded. Kingwood flooded. The Woodlands flooded,” he said, rattling off the far-flung communities affected by Harvey. “I would have to leave the city.”

Farther along the bayou, Natalie Hausman-Weiss surveyed the history of her family as it was splayed out in tatters across her Meyerland backyard.

There were the loose pages from her husband’s baby album. There were the booklets of Hebrew



Natalie Hausman-Weiss was comforted by her husband, Scott, while they cleaned up after the flood. PHOTO: ANNIE MULLIGAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

school lessons her two sons had used. There were her husband's dress shirts dangling from hangers. Somehow, the Fleetwood Mac and Sting records had stayed dry.

When the rising waters of Brays Bayou hemmed in their one-story ranch home, her younger son, Samuel, 15, waded over to an empty two-story home for sale next door and smashed a window with a hammer so they could all clamber inside. The family and six others from the neighborhood huddled on the house's second floor until they were rescued by boat.

Ms. Hausman-Weiss, 49, had moved to Houston from Birmingham, Ala., in 2011, and got a job as director of a nonprofit that takes disabled children into the outdoors. As Reform Jews, the family had been drawn to Meyerland and loved the Jewish life here.

They had initially been under contract to buy a spacious family home near the bayou, but pulled out at the last minute when they learned it had flooded three times. They were told the home they eventually bought had never taken on water.

But three months after they moved in, a small amount of rain caused water to pool up from the floor. They quickly spent \$30,000 on upgrades for protection including new gutters, French drains beneath the windows and waterproofing for bricks on the chimney.

When the bayou overflowed its banks during the Memorial Day Flood of 2015, water came in again, this time an inch high. The family replaced the floors and portions of the walls from 4 feet down, costing them roughly \$70,000, much of which was covered by their flood insurance. But the experts called that flood an anomaly, so surely nothing similar would happen again, Ms. Hausman-Weiss remembered thinking.



Donations for flood victims were distributed on the indoor tennis courts at the Jewish Community Center in Meyerland.
PHOTO: ANNIE MULLIGAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

After Harvey, the bayou swamped their home with 3 feet of water.

When they returned Sunday, “It looked like a war zone. Brown muck everywhere,” she said. “We’ve been through a lot in our lives. And I know this is just stuff. But this is our stuff.”

They family already had the maximum amount of flood insurance made available by FEMA’s National Flood Insurance Program, she said. But to do any further renovations, they would likely have to spend \$200,000 to raise the house—money they didn’t have. And who would buy it now, she said.

For now, the family is staying in a two-bedroom home owned by a friend. But eventually, they will have to return to Meyerland, and somehow reckon with their damaged home. Amid all the uncertainty about the future, there was one thing of which she was sure.

“It’s going to flood again,” she said.

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