

Harvey flood project draws questions over rising costs, delays and contractor

By Catrina Barker | The Center Square contributor

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(The Center Square) – A long-delayed flood-control project in Harvey is drawing questions about rising costs, construction delays and how the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago evaluates contractors – issues that could matter to taxpayers who help fund the agency through property taxes.

The Central Park Stormwater Detention Basin project began in 2018 and is intended to reduce flooding by adding storm sewers and a detention basin, which temporarily holds excess stormwater during heavy rain.

But major construction has yet to begin. MWRD’s current project information calls for the main construction contract to be awarded in early 2028, with construction taking about 18 months.

That means a project that began planning in 2018 could take roughly 11 years to complete.

Jill Shestokas, one of three Republican candidates running for three open MWRD commissioner seats, said the timeline and rising costs warrant greater scrutiny.

“Ultimately, people need to know, we’re talking about just barely two miles worth of sewers and a water retention basin,” Shestokas said. “Now, at the beginning of when they started this project to when they’re now estimating it could be completed is 11 years.”

MWRD oversees wastewater treatment and stormwater management for much of Cook County. Its nine commissioners approve the agency’s budget, contracts and priorities. The agency’s expenses are funded in part through property taxes.

According to a campaign news release, the estimated construction cost for the Harvey project increased from about \$9.85 million in 2023 to about \$13 million, a roughly 32% increase.

The district also increased its property-acquisition legal services agreement from \$400,000 to \$894,969, according to the release.

Shestokas, who previously worked as MWRD’s public affairs director, said taxpayers should be able to easily see why project costs change and how their money is being spent.

“Taxpayers mostly don't even have a clue this is on their property bills,” Shestokas said. “And most people this particular season have experienced really severe amounts of flooding.”

The candidates also questioned MWRD’s Sept. 3 award of a contract worth up to \$1.1 million to KLF Enterprises for demolition work associated with the project. The contract covers demolition of 16 homes and four garages, asbestos removal and restoration of the properties.

The campaign cited 36 alleged OSHA safety and health violations against KLF in 2024 involving asbestos, worker notification and protection, training, medical surveillance and exposure to asbestos, silica and lead.

A 2024 state lawsuit also alleged KLF and other companies involved in a demolition project failed to properly inspect for asbestos and improperly handled asbestos-containing materials, resulting in asbestos being released into the air. Those allegations were made in litigation and are not, by themselves, findings of liability.

MWRD’s public award memorandum identifies KLF as the “lowest responsible bidder” and discusses its price, labor agreement and participation goals. The campaign says the document does not show whether the district reviewed the OSHA citations or lawsuit before awarding the contract.

“We cannot get the records for what they knew and when or how much they investigated,” Shestokas said. “So, we have information, you know, we’re seeking via FOIA, but we have not heard back on that.”

The campaign also says the number of structures expected to benefit from the project has changed over time. MWRD’s current project information identifies 209 structures expected to benefit from the project within the study area during a 100-year storm.

Shestokas said the public should have an easier way to track major projects, including costs, schedules and changes.

The Center Square reached out to the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago for comment on the project’s timeline, cost increases and the district’s review of KLF Enterprises but did not immediately receive a response.

“If I can't find it and my slate mates can't find it, how do you expect someone who, you know, they've been living their life, raising their children and then all of a sudden they're thrust into this type of situation, and they can't get answers?” she said.

For Harvey residents, the issue is not simply the cost of a government project. The project is intended to provide flood protection, while construction delays mean residents continue waiting for the planned infrastructure.

Shestokas said greater transparency would be a priority if elected.

“We're going to fix it because if we can stay ahead of where these projects are, it's many, many, many, many projects,” she said.

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