

## Protecting Our Water Environment

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## Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago

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### Terrence J. O'Brien

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Mr. Bruce Dold  
Editorial Page Editor  
Chicago Tribune  
445 N. Michigan Avenue  
Chicago, Illinois 60611

August 10, 2010

Dear Mr. Dold,

This letter is in response to John McCarron's op-ed of Friday, August 6, 2010 entitled, "Flooded Basement? Better get used to it," in which he posed the question, "How's that main reservoir coming along?"

The main reservoir Mr. McCarron refers to is the McCook Reservoir, actually located in Bedford Park, and progress on this monumental flood control project is coming along very well, thank you.

We at the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District (MWRD) appreciate Mr. McCarron's accurate recollection that this project experienced extensive delays due to the opposition of some western suburbanites. Since the 52-mile Mainstream tunnel system that will eventually drain into the reservoir originates in Wilmette and terminates at the reservoir site, local residents felt that they were being asked to store the sewer system overflows from the North Shore, so the reservoir was relocated.

The Board of Commissioners, long committed and determined to complete both the McCook and Thornton Reservoirs and not risk waiting for elusive federal dollars to become available, voted in 2003 to advance the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) \$10 million toward the project to ensure that construction would continue. In 2004, the MWRD advanced another \$15.5 million, and this year \$6.5 million – totaling \$32 million to date to ensure the completion of the McCook Reservoir and provide additional storage for floodwater for Cook County residents.

In the south suburbs, the Thornton Reservoir is currently under construction solely by the MWRD, again demonstrating the MWRD commitment to providing the residents of Cook County with additional flood storage. The MWRD has paid over \$100 million to date, and this year, two additional \$203 million construction contracts were awarded. One more valued at \$54 million is currently being advertised for bids.

If Mr. McCarron believes that the McCook and Thornton Reservoirs by themselves will eliminate flooded basements in Chicago and other combined sewer suburbs, he has not done his homework. He correctly refers to the funding delays by federal agencies and local controversies on selecting the site of the McCook Reservoir. We are as much frustrated by these delays as anyone, but the reservoirs will not be a panacea for flooded basements, streets and viaducts.

As anyone knows, when intense rainfall strikes the Chicago area it must first get into the local sewer systems owned and maintained by municipalities. These are often designed for the five- or ten-year storm, not the +100-year local events we have experienced of late. This limitation in local sewer systems is the cause of local flooding. We are not blaming the municipalities as this is the conventional design approach used universally. Perhaps some municipalities need to examine their own systems for adequate capacity.

Property owners should take precautions, like sewer check valves or overhead sewers to prevent basement back-up, disconnecting downspouts and foundation footing drains, and blocking below-grade windows and doors.

The MWRD has had all of its systems operating at maximum capacity and the tunnels have been fully utilized in these recent storms. We began discharging excess floodwaters to the lake as soon as practical. Despite our best efforts, the frequent and intense storms overwhelm all the drainage systems. Someday the tunnels and reservoirs will hopefully eliminate, but certainly will lessen the frequency of having to discharge to the lake. Storms like September 2008 and July 2010 are examples of why we cannot say "never again." The lake will always be the outlet of last resort.

As Evanstonian McCarron well knows, his city invested \$200 million on improving the local drainage system and, despite some low-rate federal loans, city dwellers are paying for it on their water bills. Some other municipalities have also made similar investments, but by far, most have not.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Terrence J. O'Brien". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Terrence J. O'Brien