



# WATER RESILIENCE IN GOOD TIMES & BAD

An event series exploring water resilience, now and post-COVID-19

**CLEAN, SAFE, AND ABUNDANT**  
Solutions for stormwater and water quality

**MAY 19, 2020**  
**TUESDAY @ 3:30 PM CST**



EQUITY LEGAL SERVICES





# WATER RESILIENCE IN GOOD TIMES & BAD



An event series exploring water resilience, now and post-COVID-19

## ESSENTIAL INVESTMENT

Why water infrastructure should be part of stimulus and economic recovery

**MAY 5, 2020**  
**TUESDAY @ 3:30 PM CST**

## WATER AFFORDABILITY IN NORTHEASTERN ILLINOIS

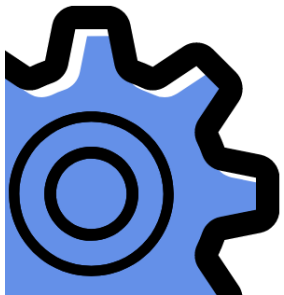
Trends, policies, and a path forward

**MAY 12, 2020**  
**TUESDAY @ 3:30 PM CST**

## CLEAN, SAFE, AND ABUNDANT

Solutions for stormwater and water quality

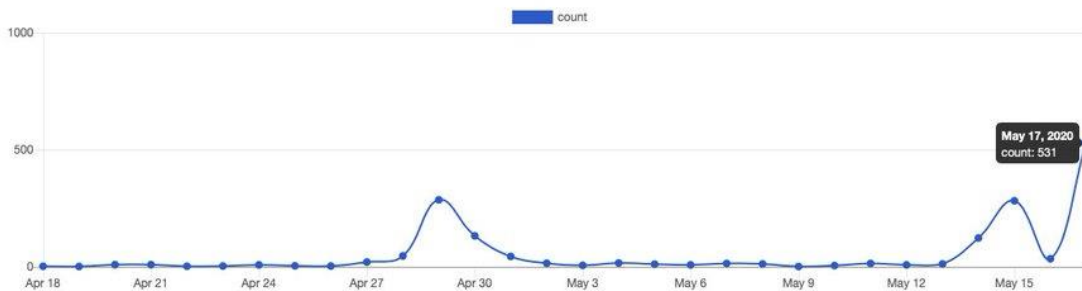
**MAY 19, 2020**  
**TUESDAY @ 3:30 PM CST**



*Josh Ellis, Vice President, Metropolitan Planning Council  
@MPCJosh  
jellis@metroplanning.org*

**WELCOME**

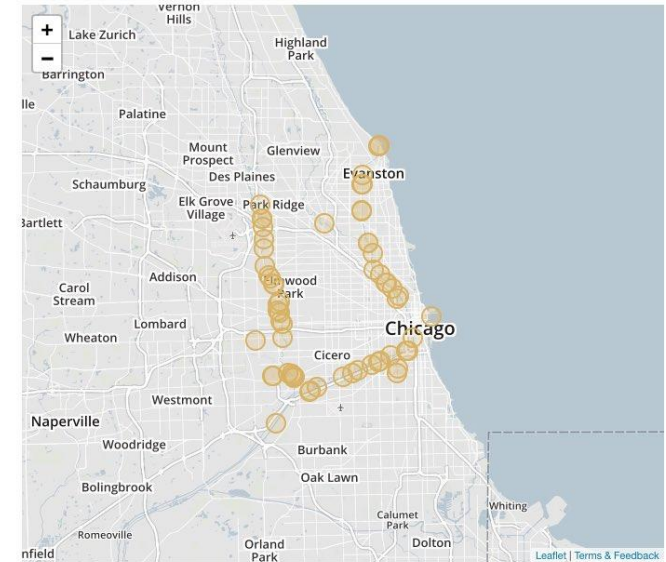
# Resilience in the face of Climate Change



[History](#) [Español](#)

Is raw sewage being dumped into Chicago rivers right now?

**Yes, in 63 locations**



Location	River segment
Pratt Ave (E)	NSC Lower (NSWRP)
North Shore Ave (E)	NSC Lower (NSWRP)
Central Ave (5900 - 6100 North) (N)	NBCR Upper (NSC Confluence)
Lawrence Ave (W)	NBCR Lower (NSC Confluence)

# Forces undermining resilience in the face of... pretty much anything

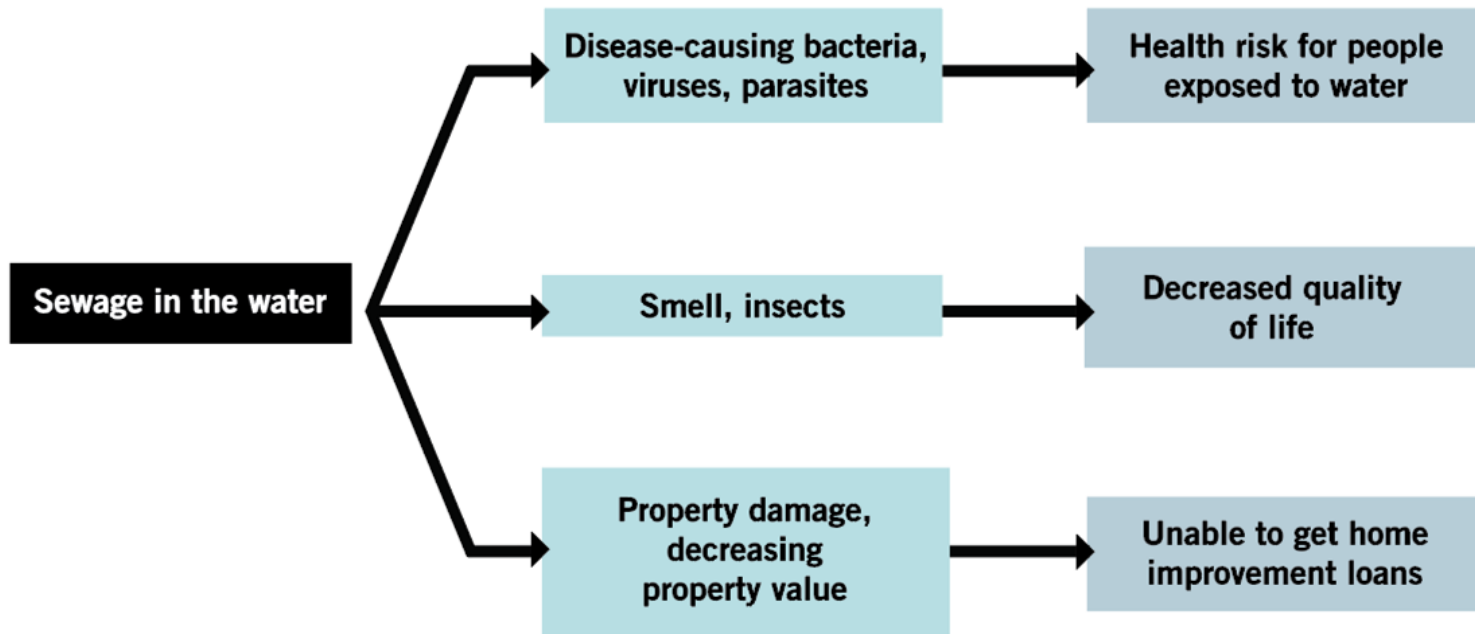
- Yes, rain, heat, cold, etc.
- But also:
  - Racial and economic inequities
  - Tax policy
  - Land use decisions
  - Variable and insufficient government capacity
  - Overgovernance and undergovernance
  - Basic compliance and oversight failings
  - Failing infrastructure
  - And so on

# **Community-Led Advocacy to Stop Chronic Flooding and Raw Sewage in Centreville, Illinois**

Connecting local, state and federal responses to multiple disasters

Nicole Nelson, Executive Director, Equity Legal Services  
Meleah Geertsma, Senior Attorney, Environmental Justice, NRDC  
May 19, 2020

# Centreville Stormwater/Sewage Issues



- Use our findings to identify ways to address the flooding and sewage overflow problems to get them fixed.
- Determine if there are any health risks associated with exposure or contact with the sewage and water overflow in the Centreville to connect the community with appropriate resources.





# The History

Centreville is a city in St. Clair County Illinois. The city has a total area of 4.29 square miles. Centreville is the poorest city in the state of Illinois, as well as one of the poorest cities in the nation.



## TIMELINE

This timeline contains a number of important events regarding Centreville flooding and sewage, but is not intended and should not be considered as a comprehensive timeline of relevant events.

## LOCAL GOVERNMENT

**MAYOR MARIUS JACKSON**  
**6 ALDERMEN**  
**4 OTHER CITY COUNCIL MEMBERS**

## DEMOGRAPHICS

**POPULATION: 5,094**  
**UNEMPLOYMENT RATE: 9.6%**  
**POVERTY RATE: 48.1%**

1800      1900      1910      1950      1960

**1850:** French and German farmers and railroad workers populate the 'Centreville Station' area.

**1890:** The Illinois Central Railroad buys tracks around Centreville.

**1903:** The Great Flood of 1903 brings forward the proposition of the Metro-East Sanitary District Levees and the proposition is carried out.

**1910:** Centreville is incorporated into a township with one village.

**1957:** The City of Centreville is incorporated.

**1969:** Centreville Township's initial sewage system construction plan is completed, 20 years after the plan's proposal.



## CITY/TOWNSHIP OF CENTREVILLE

The City/Township of Centreville have responsibilities for water, water and stormwater services in various sections of the Centreville townships/city area.

## COMMONFIELDS OF CAHOKIA PUBLIC WATER DISTRICT

A sanitary sewer system that services approximately 5 square miles of land, serving a population of approximately 8,100 residents.

The sanitary sewer system is funded by a utility fee. The utility fee provides a dedicated source of funds for the operation, maintenance, rehabilitation, and improvement of the District's sanitary sewer system.

From Commonfields of Cahokia Public Water District Sanitary Sewer System Capacity, Management, Operation and Maintenance (CMO&M) Program, August 2014

## AMERICAN BOTTOMS

### Vision & Mission

We will produce a high quality wastewater effluent to protect our nation's water resources both today and for future generations.

### History

The American Bottoms Wastewater Treatment Plant services East St. Louis, the Village of Cahokia, the Village of Skaget, parts of Alorton, Centreville, and Belleville, and areas in Centreville Township served by the Commonfields of Cahokia Public Water District.

Each community is responsible for the operation, repair, and maintenance of its own sewer system.

[www.americanbottoms.com](http://www.americanbottoms.com)

1970      1980      1990      2000      2010

**1976:** Commonfields of Cahokia Public Water District buys Centreville Township's sewage system and continues to manage both tap water and wastewater for the Township.

**1986:** The American Bottoms Wastewater Treatment Plant is opened to treat municipal wastewater from surrounding municipalities, including parts of the City and Township of Centreville.

**1993:** A year of heavy flooding greatly damages the St. Louis area levees and causes damage to local sewer systems.

**1994:** East St. Louis public works director blames flooding impacting East St. Louis, Centreville and Washington Park partly on failure to clean and dredge Harding Ditch.

**1988-90:** Problems with the East St. Louis sewer system, to which Centreville's sewer system is tied, make national news. U.S. EPA sues East St. Louis for misuse of federal sewer money. St. Clair County State's Attorney and East Side Health District sue City for sewage failures.

**2002:** The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers notifies then Mayor Seaberry that I-255 is a barrier to water flow between the 63rd Street area of Centreville and Harding Ditch.

**2003:** The takeover of the Centreville-Alorton Sewer District by Commonfields of Cahokia is announced, along with the need for extensive emergency repairs due to failure to clean and grease sewer pumps.

**2007:** FEMA notifies the Metro East levee district that the levees will lose accreditation unless significant problems with underseepage and other issues are addressed.

**2009:** Illinois EPA issues plan identifying Harding Ditch as failing to meet water quality standards for fecal coliform.

**2013:** Heavy rainfall and flooding results in emergency rescue of six families in neighborhood of 40-45 homes off of State Street near the I-255 exit.

**2019:** St. Clair County again recognizes that "runoff originating from the bluff areas to the east of the American Bottoms contribute [sic] markedly to flooding, ponding, and soil wetness."

# The Residents

## VITTORIO BLAYLOCK



Mr Blaylock's frustration with the ever-present flooding in Centreville stems from the huge cost it has placed on him and the community he loves. In 2015, to fix the damage caused by frequent flooding, he had all of his plumbing redone at a cost that now equals the total value of his home. Indeed, Mr Blaylock has deep roots in Centreville; his father lived across the street for over 30 years until his passing and Blaylock himself moved in over 20 years ago. Over the years, he improved his house and the surrounding area, but emphasises that in recent years, residents feel powerless to stop the water. Not without many attempts; Mr Blaylock became a Centreville Township Precinct Committeeman in 2014 to seek change in the community. What continues is his love for his town and animals. Horses, rabbits and chicken keep Mr Blaylock company as he seeks to stay put amongst friends and family.

*The lack of clean water or a functioning sanitary system in Centreville has left residents living in, as Vittorio Blaylock puts it, "Third World" conditions."*



## WALTER BYRD



Retired resident Mr Byrd has a boat in front of his property to rescue neighbors who can't escape their homes during bad flood events. But this hasn't been worst of his worries; sewage water started backing up in his toilet six years ago. "I spent 37 years working in sewers and then I have to put my family through it?" He has tried to keep the standing sewage water at bay but the ditches in front of his home attract mosquitoes so big that he and his family no longer open windows in the summer. The cost of A/C racks up thousands of dollars of debt. Not only has he attempted to fix issues with his home by raising its foundations, but also for his neighbour by putting in a check valve to keep sewage at bay. In 1996, he built the house with his own retirement money to move into a quiet community-oriented neighborhood with his whole family. He's angry that the sewer failure has gotten so bad that both his neighbours have already moved out.



## MICHAEL McNEAL

**"After the white folks moved, they stopped doing stuff out here."**

That was in the late seventies. Infrastructural problems have gotten worse such that Mr McNeal's home in Centreville now worth less than what he bought it for over 40 years ago. Over the years, he estimates he has spent over \$15,000 on flood and sewer repairs to prevent sewage backing up in his toilet and bathtub. It continues to happen yet there's little to no response when he calls for help from water management companies.

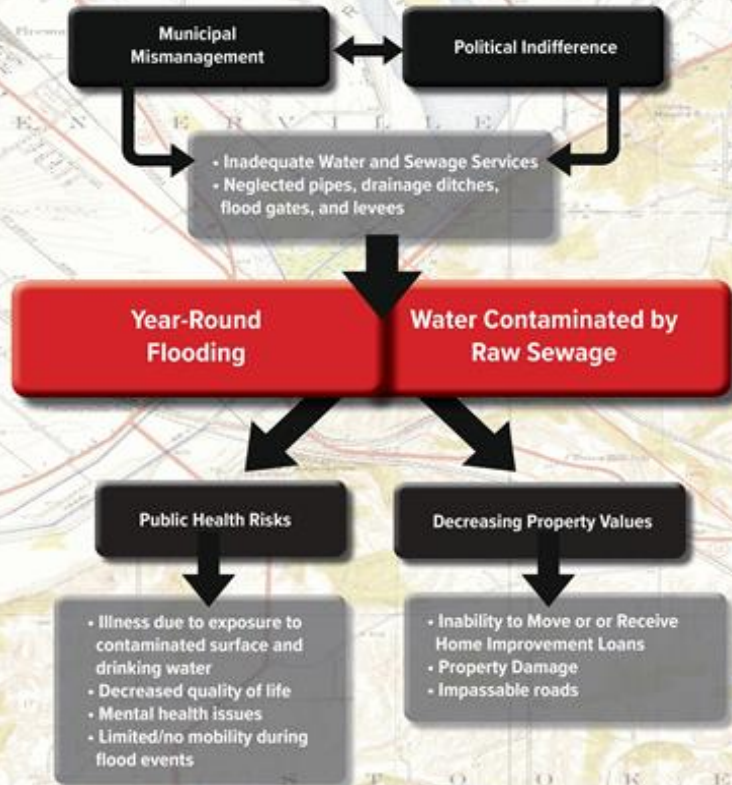
## HAZEL LEFLORE

The feeling of being left behind despite complaints and town-hall meetings is a common one amongst Centreville residents, particularly for long-time resident Hazel Leflore. "We have been here for 42 years so I can't even tell you the amount of times we've called." She remembers that when her family was the first black family to move into Centreville, it was a wonderful place to live. In her view, nothing was as unpleasant as the stench of sewage that now leaks in her yard.

**When flooding happens the sewage mixes with "water [that] runs across the street into our yard and fills up the trench."**

Even though her house is raised from street level, the constant smell means she and her husband no longer enjoy their yard. But Centreville's safety makes her want to stay and see the problem fixed. In all the time that she lived there, she has never needed to call the police.

# Findings & Risks



# Next Steps

## ▶ WATER TESTING

- Continue drinking water testing for bacteria

## ▶ HISTORICAL DATA ANALYSIS

- Compiling decades of sewage and flooding issue documentation from municipalities and utilities companies
- Archival research on the development of Centreville's water infrastructure

## ▶ PUBLIC HEALTH ASSESSMENT

- Assess major health concerns and how residents are interacting with the healthcare system.
- Identify key stakeholders to learn more about the state of healthcare access.

## ▶ LEGAL ACTION

- Attorneys from Equity Legal Services, Metropolitan St. Louis Equal Housing and Opportunity Council, Natural Resources Defense Council, and Earthjustice will continue to interview residents and explore options for legal action.

## ▶ COMMUNITY BUILDING

- Organization of a Centreville Resident Committee
- Bottled water drive to address residents' concerns of possible drinking water contamination due to sewage in surface water.

## Timeline Sources

Timeline information from 1940-1990 can be found in 1992 Final Official Statement prepared by Bernard Securities under authority of Commonfields. Most information comes from the District Manager, Joseph L.Vigini. 1992 Board Chairman Robert Bragman was the same chairman that oversaw the 1976 sale of Centreville's sewer system.

Chen, Eli. "Metro East Levees to Receive \$96 Million in Flood Protection Improvements." *St. Louis Public Radio*. <https://www.stpublicradio.org/post/metro-east-levees-receive-95-million-flood-protection-improvements>.

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Margaret Gilman, Robert Goodrich, and Tim O'Neil. "Metro East Residents Tread Storm Water Clogged Ditch, Levee Breaks Add to Surging Trouble." *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 29, 1994.

"Missouri Families Evacuated as Homes Flood." *Belleville News-Democrat*, April 13, 2013. <https://www.fishhouse.com/home/news/1092453/east-st-louis-missouri-families-evacuated-as-homes-flood>.

Programmatic EIS, East St. Louis and Vicinity, Ecosystem Restoration and Flood Damage Reduction Project, Madison and St. Clair Counties. Environmental Impact Statement, 2004.

"Pros Will Take over Water, Sewer District." *Belleville News-Democrat*, December 13, 2003.

"Rain Causes Sewage Backup at Two Schools." *United Press International*. <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1989/03/20/Rain-causes-sewage-backup-at-two-schools/9520606373200/>.

Southwestern Illinois Planning Commission. "Multi-Hazard Mitigation Plan St. Clair County, Illinois," April 2009.

# Cumulative Vulnerability and “New” Disasters

- Exponential impacts: vulnerabilities are not separable or simply additive
  - Long understood in the social-racial justice, environmental/climate justice, and public health spaces
  - New findings emerging from COVID disparate impacts
- Centreville and COVID
  - Immediate impacts of sheltering in place heading into the rainy season: imagine sheltering-in-place with a flooded-out basement and raw sewage all over your property, and drinking water that looks and smells awful
  - Vulnerability to virus spread and impacts given location in St. Louis Metro area, resident characteristics
  - Intersection of flood/sewage emergency response and virus response

# Taking Action

- Local
  - Mitigate near-term flooding and sewage impacts through resident/ally/community action (emergency pumps, ditch cleanouts). Complications due to COVID.
  - Support residents through additional focused initiatives within their and allies' control (food pantry plus drinking water)
- Local-State
  - Work with responsive electeds (Sen Duckworth) to improve deployment of existing resources via line of emergency response from residents to local government to IEMA etc.
  - Assess new resources arising from COVID response and how to access for local support purposes
  - Raise profile of continuing need to address flooding and sewage conditions that will worsen in the rainy season, as virus impacts increase and peak

# Taking Action (cont)

- State and State-Federal
  - Raise profile of how emergency response to flooding and sewage events needs to adapt and respond in light of virus threats
  - Include asks for near-term flooding and sewage response that will mitigate water impacts upfront and prepare responders and residents for inevitable remaining events with layered COVID threat
  - Include asks for continued oversight and enforcement of existing stormwater and wastewater compliance obligations, along with assistance for utilities in coming into or maintaining compliance
- Federal
  - Include range of asks related to near-term and long-term stormwater and wastewater measures, focused on infrastructure funding and operation, emergency response, housing assistance
  - Look beyond traditional water advocacy areas to broader community-building programs

# Water and Wastewater System Vulnerabilities and Solutions



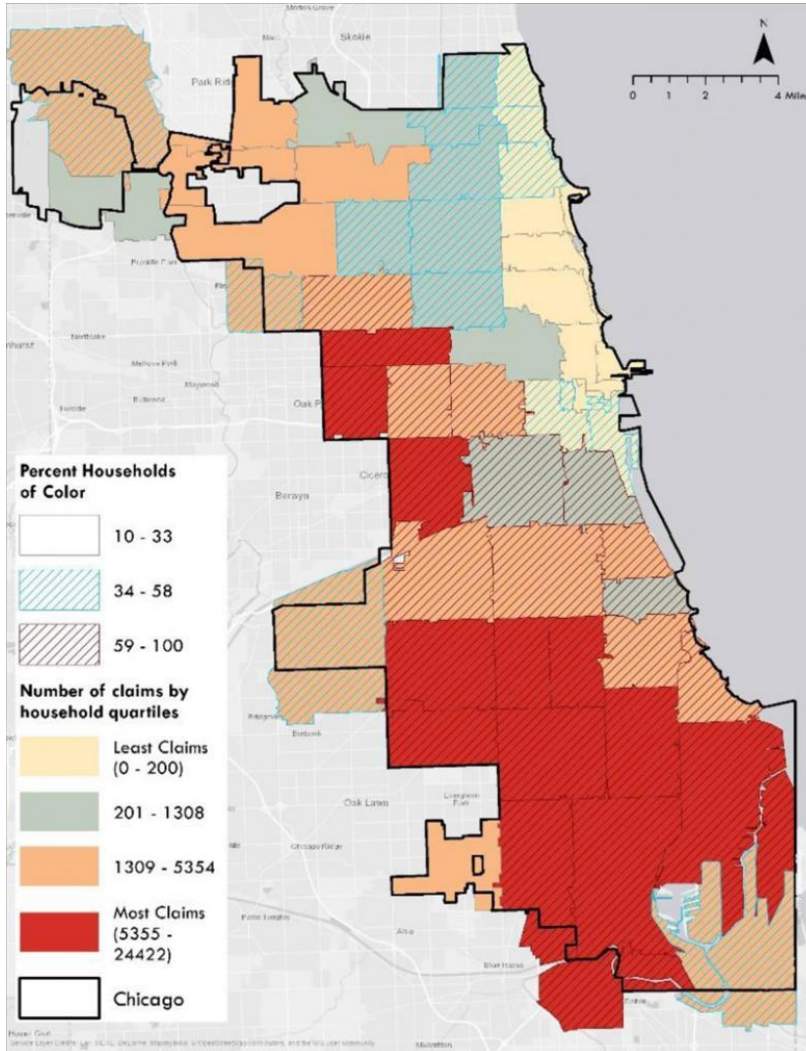
# Water and Wastewater System Vulnerabilities



- Millions lack access
- Flooding is common and costly
- Lead service lines
- Disproportionate impacts: race and economic status
- Water utility operations



# Solutions: Chatham Rain Ready Pilot



- Dedicated Delivery Team
- Home Assessments
- Home Upgrades
- Neighborhood Upgrades
- Community Investments

# Federal / State Stimulus



- Community Development Block Grants
- State Revolving Loan Funds
- US EPA WIIN grants
- State budget
- State capital spending
- SB 1532

# Contact information

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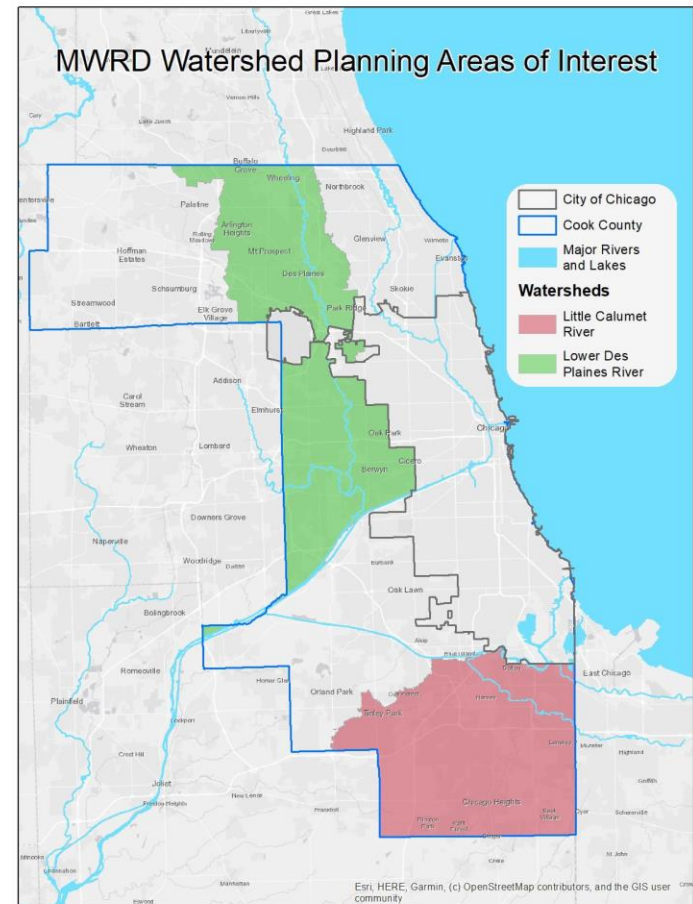
@ElevateEnergyNP



@Elevate\_Energy

# Another approach - StormStore

- Credit trading enables private investment in stormwater systems to be located in communities that need them most
- Can also lower development costs and create value for previously marginal land





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