

Fixing Swan Lake ‘nightmare’ flooding in north Reno won’t be cheap or easy

[Benjamin Spillman](#), Reno Gazette Journal Published 4:50 p.m. PT April 29, 2019 | Updated 10:25 p.m. PT April 29, 2019

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The waters in Swan Lake started rising two years ago. Residents there are still worried. Sam Gross and Benjamin Spillman and Anjeanette Damon, Reno Gazette Journal

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The floodwaters of Swan Lake have long since chased Tracy Hall from her North Valleys home.

Hall says she’s lucky to have friendly neighbors who allow her to live in an RV on their property while water laps at a temporary barrier on the edge of her property.

But Hall and others are tired of the disruption to their lives that started more than two years ago when the formerly dry lake in Lemmon Valley filled with stormwater runoff and urban effluent.

“We are living this nightmare, we want it to end,” said Hall, who on Monday told members of the Reno City Council and Washoe County Commission she recently rescued a puppy that got past a barrier and was in danger of drowning. “Please, come together and give us some kind of fix.”

Hall and more than a dozen other residents pleaded with the city and county elected officials to ramp up efforts to drain the area quickly and make sure the floods don’t return.

“We can’t do anything about it,” resident Ann Marie Nevarez said during a rare joint meeting of the city and county governing boards. “All these people are here asking for help because we can’t do it.”



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Washoe County installs temporary inflatable barriers, called Tiger Dams, in front of homes bordering Swan Lake along Shane Way in Lemmon Valley on April 3, 2019. (Photo: Jason Bean/RGJ)

Floodwaters have plagued Lemmon Valley since January 2017, when heavy precipitation filled Swan Lake beyond normal levels, pushing it into roads and homes.

Officials installed temporary pumps and barriers to stop the immediate problem. But heavy rains and snow in subsequent years sent more water into the lake than the amount that evaporates.

The lake is in a closed basin with no natural path for the water to leave, besides evaporation. That's left residents to cope with the problems associated with rising and falling water and officials to struggle for answers.

The joint meeting was a chance for residents to speak out to officials elected to represent the flooded areas.

"This is a community problem not a Washoe County problem, not a city of Reno problem," resident Lori Beach said.

The meeting, which ran longer than four hours, highlighted potential solutions. But it also showed the huge scope of the problem and foreshadowed that some of the solutions might be controversial.

"I think we have a regional problem, it is going to require regional investment," Reno City Council member Jenny Brekhus said.



Floodwaters encroach on a home near Swan Lake, an ephemeral lake north of Reno. Residents are worried snowmelt will push the water beyond the ability of barriers to contain it. March 13, 2019. (Photo: Benjamin Spillman and Sam Gross)

Brekhus pitched a one-year moratorium on development in the basin in order to study the source of the problem and identify long-term solutions.

It's an idea that's popular with residents, who place much of the blame for the flooding on the influx of new development.

Development increases impervious surfaces, thus increasing runoff, and also the amount of wastewater going to treatment plants that are overflowing into the basin.

"Every water hookup, every sewer hookup is exacerbating the problem right now, which is at an emergency level," Brekhus said.

But other elected officials and even some staff members questioned the necessity.

"We feel we can at least move forward with appropriate development," said Assistant County Manager Dave Solaro.

The development moratorium wasn't the only big idea on the table.

Several officials asked city and county staff members about widening and raising Lemmon Drive. They hope raising the road will make the busy arterial serve as a levee.

Washoe County Commission Chairman Vaughn Hartung asked Solaro whether the federal government would pay all or some of the cost to raise the road.

Raising the road was already included on a list of items already in planning, but others questioned the need.

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Brekhus asked whether expanding the road would contribute to problems by inducing further development or diverting money from other road projects.

Others said raising the road simply isn't necessary.

"The neighborhoods do not want Lemmon Valley Drive raised," resident Tim Fadda said. "We don't need it."

While development and infrastructure were among the headier issues officials and residents discussed at the meeting, they also covered other ideas that could alleviate the immediate problems.

Among those were proposals to speed up the rate of evaporation by digging infiltration ponds, spraying water into the air and growing water-intensive crops such as alfalfa in low-lying areas.

Dwayne Smith, Washoe County's director of engineering and capital projects, said the natural evaporation rate reduces the lake level by about 2.5 feet annually.

New water flowing in, whether it's natural storm and snowmelt inflow or treated effluent or runoff from hard surfaces in developments, offsets evaporation.

And in recent years evaporation hasn't kept pace with inflows.

Without any assistance, it would likely take five years or longer for the basin to empty through evaporation, Smith said.

He said efforts to speed up the process, whether by spraying water in the air, filtering it into the ground or putting it on crops, could lower the lake by an additional one to two feet annually in addition to the natural evaporation.

"These are things we believe can be implemented pretty quickly," Smith said.

But those efforts would cost money.

Smith's estimates to decrease the lake level by an additional foot annually ranged from \$2 million to \$3.5 million. Using short-term methods to lower the lake an additional two feet annually could cost from \$3.6 million to \$7.3 million.

Officials also proposed additional ideas. Washoe County Commissioner Kitty Jung urged staff members to encourage companies that use water to control dust on construction sites to take it from the lake.

[Lemmon Valley Flooding](#) by [Benjamin Spillman](#) on Scribd

Jung and others also said once the lake level is stabilized the city and county should consider ways to manage it as an asset to the community.

"This should be a regional amenity, a lake that can be used by everybody in Washoe County," Jung said.

Washoe County Commissioner Jeanne Herman raised the possibility of elevating structures.

"It is less costly than buying out people who don't want to move," Herman said "If I lived there I wouldn't want to move."

While the meeting on Monday was a chance for people to air grievances and ideas in an open forum, it didn't include many direct actions.

The county and city elected officials voted to launch a website to post progress reports and answers to frequently asked questions.

And Brekhus promised to pitch her proposal for a development moratorium and calls for agreements between the two governments to take meaningful steps toward solving the problem to the Reno City Council.

Residents reacted with a mix of skepticism that officials were listening to their concerns and hope that they will take swift action.

"Nobody seems to understand what we are dealing with," resident Pat Flynn said. "I really hope ... this is a real thing and not just a big show."

Benjamin Spillman covers the outdoors and environment in Northern Nevada, from backcountry skiing in the Sierra to the latest from Lake Tahoe's ecosystem. [Support his work by subscribing to RGJ.com right here.](#)