

Decades of Debate

We all know that flooding in Westwood is an on going problem, but did you know that residents have been fighting this problem for decades? The archives of the Westwood Heritage Society provided some interesting insight into the issue, its genesis, development, and attempts to resolve it.

Up until the 1960s, the K-mart Plaza and Westwood House were part of the Comfort Coal woods and swamp. The corner area of Broadway, Fairview Avenue, and Lake where Timmy's Garage and the Westwood car wash now reside was home to Barney Greve's Ice house which sourced its water from the pond on that corner. There was also a pond where the Roxbury condominiums and their parking lot are now located. These riparian lands have been developed over the years as have the properties upstream. As a result, more and more storm water runoff has been channeled into the Woodcliff Lake Reservoir and the Pascack Brook. Many of these developments were controversial in their day and would not be allowed under our current Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) regulations. In fact, there is an account in the archives that reports that the Roxbury was built despite the objections of a former Borough construction official.

The archives also show that flooding was a regular problem even when these lands weren't developed. A 1915 article reported considerable flooding damage. In 1968, former Mayor Woods sent a letter to residents "the area surrounding your house has been inundated by water resulting from a record rainfall and Hackensack Water Company's need to release flood waters from Woodcliff Lake". A 1989 newspaper reported that a quick release of water from the reservoir flooded more than 30 homes. Our Assemblywoman at the time, Elizabeth Randall introduced legislation to prohibit operating "a reservoir in a way that causes flooding," but it was never signed into law because there was no quantifiable way to prove that the dam was causing the flooding and not shear volume and speed of the storm water in the waterway system.

Today, the debate remains the same. Does the Woodcliff Lake Reservoir dam and its floodgates cause downstream flooding, and can they be operated in such a way as to mitigate downstream flooding?

Rather than continue to debate this issue with information from different sides of the issue, Westwood officials will propose to the surrounding towns and United Water that we collectively hire a hydraulic engineer who will represent all parties involved for an unbiased opinion of what can be done. We are also asking United Water to review its standard operating procedures and compare them with the specific occurrences In March and April which we will then compare to the recent Boswell report.

In addition, Mayor Birkner and Councilwoman Waneck will attend a July session hosted by Bergen Swan on "Stream Management and Flood Control" which will include information on rain gardens, riparian plantings and stream management.

Currently there is no movement on Senate bill S-54.

I would like to thank Linda Salib of the Westwood Heritage Society for spending an evening with me and providing so many great photos and articles on the issue of flooding in Westwood.

Please note that the timing for the submission of this article did not permit for any updates regarding the June 23rd storm which will be forthcoming.

Submitted by Councilwoman Cindy Waneck