

Okaloosa's Sylvania Heights Seeks Environmental Justice

WUWF | By [Jennie McKeon](#)

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The Sylvania Heights community in Fort Walton Beach has been facing stormwater issues for decades. With aging infrastructure and little stormwater mitigation, the problem is spilling into other neighborhoods and residents are anxious to see some action.

Barry Gray has been a vocal advocate for the Sylvania Heights neighborhood for decades. It's where he grew up; it's home to him.

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Sylvania Heights is an unincorporated neighborhood in Okaloosa County with a predominately black population and a median household income of \$36,573. The neighborhood is adjacent to industrial parks as well as waste management and manufacturing sites and backs up to Gap Creek which begins at the eastern side of Hurlbert Field and goes through Fort Walton Beach and unincorporated Okaloosa County before finally feeding into Cinco Bayou. Contaminated floodwaters often collect and settle in the community.

For decades, Gray has been concerned about the community's water quality. Established in 1965, it has no stormwater system. And as the surrounding areas became more developed, it seems the problem has only gotten worse.

“See these holes right here, these drainage holes? All this water now goes into that drainage hole and runs into Sylvania Heights — into that poor neighborhood,” said Gray as he took residents on a tour of the Gap Creek area over the summer.



Jennie McKeon/WUWF Public Media

Barry Gray talks about the stormwater issues in the Sylvania Heights neighborhood.

It wasn't the first tour Gray hosted. He did pretty much the same thing about 20 years ago. But, he says, not much changed. He believes this time will be different: "I think today we have a group of people that we can come together and create some solutions."

Okaloosa Democrats have helped get the word out about Sylvania Heights, calling it an **"environmental justice" issue**.

"We have always been considered a left-behind community," said Debra Riley, a local social worker and a native to Fort Walton Beach. "We're looking at our community, it's a predominately African-American community and we've been the last to be served. And that's not just in our community, that's across the nation."

Decades of neglect and improper stormwater systems have allowed pollutants to flow directly into the water, causing closures at Garniers Beach Park in Fort Walton Beach.

“Look down to your left, see that gas station, everything from that gas station — that’s Gap Creek on the other side of the road,” said Gray during the tour. “It’s a pond over there and all of that water from the gas station runs into Gap Creek, it’s not even being treated.”

There are a handful of studies on the stormwater runoff and pollution issues in Sylvania Heights dating back to 1978. In 2008, Okaloosa County and the City of Fort Walton Beach joined forces on a grant from the Department of Environmental Protection to conduct a water-quality study that identified 17 water-quality improvement projects.

The city has completed three of those projects, including a one-acre pond expansion, and building a rain garden at the end of one cul-de-sac. Just last year, the city spent nearly \$1 million on cleaning up the area and upgrading infrastructure, says Daniel Payne, the city’s public works and utilities director.

For its part, the county has completed at least three projects identified in the previous studies, including expanding and reconstructing stormwater ponds and drainage ditch improvements. There are at least [150 stormwater issues](#) identified in the county. Currently, they are working on a new stormwater facility to be placed on Eglin property south of Hurlburt Field that will reduce stormwater flow into Gap Creek.

Payne said weather events in the past few years have only highlighted the issue.

“We can’t handle natural disasters,” he said. “The area exists in a wetland-ish area all around so you have a very impervious area in a place where the surrounding area is a watershed that creates some issues, as well.”



Jennie McKeon/WUWF Public Media

People fish in Gap Creek despite signage that says "No Fishing by order of FDOT" nearby. The water is untreated and runs through parts of Fort Walton Beach and unincorporated Okaloosa County.

The city has an advantage since it has a dedicated stormwater funding source. The county relies on ad valorem taxes. Together, they want to come up with long-term solutions. But it's not easy.

"In general, this falls into a lot of what we have are longstanding subdivisions or neighborhoods where they were developed at a time where stormwater management is nothing like what it is today," said Autrey.

Autrey said overall the Panhandle is behind the curve when it comes to stormwater management compared to other parts of the state because it wasn't as developed as it is now. And the outdated stormwater infrastructure doesn't help. During the tour,

Gray pointed out a ditch on Jonquil Avenue in Fort Walton Beach where stormwater flows directly into Gap Creek.

"That's a federal violation," he said. "You can't just run your community (water) into a natural creek."

Sylvania Heights is a delicate issue because it's overdeveloped. But it's also a low-income neighborhood. Many of the residents simply can't go anywhere else. If the community was built by today's standards, it would have 20% fewer homes, Autrey said.

"I'm not willing to walk up to 20% of those residents and say, in that subdivision or any other for that matter, and say 'Hey listen, your house needs to go so we can put a hole in the ground to put stormwater in.'"

While there have been some improvements in recent years, Gray worries that the problem may only get worse before any impact is made.

"It's like kicking the can down the road," he said.

That's why Gray won't give up. Not on his community, not on his neighbors.

"I have kids and grandkids and we want to leave them something better for them than what was left for us," he said. "So, that's why we're trying to solve the issue. I don't want my kids and my grandkids to have to fight like we're fighting. I want them to be able to enjoy the community we lived in."

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Jennie joined WUWF in 2018 as digital content producer and reporter.

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