

An Open Letter from Bryan Taunton Candidate for Mayor of Sylacauga

Dear Friends and Neighbors,

As I've spoken with residents across our city, one issue continues to rise to the top — flooding and drainage problems that are damaging homes, driving up insurance rates, and threatening the safety and well-being of our neighborhoods. The downtown issue is a separate conversation, as it will require state road work. This letter will focus on residential and rural city areas.

Sylacauga is facing a serious challenge with overgrown and obstructed drainage ditches. Many of these ditches, some located on private property, were originally designed to carry rainwater safely away from our homes and streets. Unfortunately, years of neglect, overgrowth, and debris buildup have left these systems ineffective. When water has nowhere to go, it goes where it shouldn't — into our yards, our streets, and too often, our homes.

As your candidate for Mayor, I want to be clear: this problem must be addressed, and it must be addressed with urgency, cooperation, and common sense. Here's how I plan to lead that effort:

1. Identify and Prioritize Critical Drainage Areas

A complete assessment and mapping of Sylacauga's drainage system will help us identify the areas most at risk and ensure resources are used wisely.

2. Launch a Voluntary Drainage Easement Program

When drainage ditches run through private property, I will encourage a voluntary easement agreement between the city and property owners. This will allow city crews to access and maintain these ditches without infringing on property rights — all while protecting the greater good of surrounding homes and neighborhoods.

3. Expand Maintenance and Cleanout Operations

Under my leadership, we'll make sure our street and maintenance crews are equipped and supported to clean out ditches, remove overgrowth, and restore proper water flow wherever possible — starting with the most at-risk areas.

4. Engage the Community and Build Cooperation

I believe in transparent leadership. That means hosting public forums, sharing updates, and working hand-in-hand with residents to solve this problem. We will communicate clearly and often, because you deserve to be heard — and informed.

I am committed to exhausting every cooperative, voluntary solution first. Property rights matter. But so does public safety — and if voluntary cooperation fails in the most critical areas, we must be prepared to take further action to protect homes and neighborhoods. That step, however, would only come as a last resort. Rest assured there are further measures which can legally be taken when there is a clear risk to the safety of our citizens and continued damage to property. We certainly want to avoid those measures if possible, but a clear and present danger and risk of property damage has already been well established.

Sylacauga needs a Mayor who won't kick the can down the road. Our people deserve leadership that confronts real problems with real solutions. I'm running to bring proactive, responsible leadership to City Hall — and fixing our flooding issues is one of my top priorities.

Let's work together to build a stronger, safer, and better Sylacauga.

Sincerely,
Bryan Taunton

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Evaluation of Eminent Domain for Drainage Easements

Pros:

- Ensures long-term access to critical drainage infrastructure for maintenance.
- Addresses ongoing flooding and property damage in a proactive, permanent way.
- Sends a strong message that public safety and property protection take precedence.

Cons:

- Eminent domain is a legal process that requires fair compensation and can face litigation or public opposition.
- May be viewed as heavy-handed by property owners and create negative publicity or resistance.
- Can be costly and time-consuming depending on the number of properties involved and potential legal battles.

Legal Feasibility in Alabama:

- Alabama law allows eminent domain for public purposes, which includes drainage, stormwater management, and flood prevention.
- However, the city must demonstrate necessity and follow proper condemnation procedures, including appraisal and compensation.

Alternative or Supplemental Solutions

1. Drainage Easement Program (Voluntary):

- Offer compensation or tax incentives to landowners in exchange for permanent drainage easements.
- This keeps the land under private ownership but grants the city legal access to maintain it.
- Market it as a public-private partnership rather than a takeover.

2. Public Nuisance Ordinance:

- Explore declaring blocked or overgrown ditches a public nuisance, especially if they contribute to flooding or water damage.
- This could allow the city to intervene and bill the property owner without full eminent domain.

3. Flood Management Overlay District:

- Create a zoning overlay that identifies critical drainage corridors where additional restrictions or requirements apply, including access for maintenance.
- It can also tie into future development codes to ensure drainage remains clear.

4. State/Federal Grants for Stormwater Infrastructure:

- Pursue funding through FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP), the Army Corps of Engineers, or EPA Clean Water grants.
- These may also help offset costs of acquiring easements or drainage rights.

5. Public Awareness Campaign:

- Help homeowners understand that clearing these ditches:
 - Prevents damage to their own homes and neighbors'.
 - Can reduce local flood insurance premiums.
 - Is a matter of public safety, not just maintenance.

My Final Recommendation:

Start with a voluntary easement initiative backed by a strong public education campaign. Let the community see that this is a solution *for them*, not against them. Simultaneously, begin identifying high-risk properties where eminent domain may become necessary if cooperation fails — and prepare the legal framework and funding for those cases.