



## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Monday, June 29, 2020

### Remove racism from how Harris County handles flooding

Systemic racism and environmental racism directly caused hardships and injustices in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, many of which we are still dealing with today. **Institutional and systemic racism touch all systems, including how we deal with flooding in Harris County.** In this national moment of reckoning, our black, brown, asian, communities of color and low-income neighborhoods deserve better.

Harris County is ground zero for overlapping crises — a global pandemic with spiking health and economic effects, a hurricane season that threatens to worsen each year we ignore the climate crisis and community members clamoring for true justice across all systems. That includes how we deal with one of our biggest problems in Harris County: flooding.

For months now, advocates have been working with Harris County Flood Control District and other county departments to create better results. The 2018 \$2.5 billion bond for flood protection projects approved by voters calls for equity. In August 2019, Commissioners Court passed the [Harris Thrives Resolution](#), calling for re-imagining of the Flood Control District Community Task Force. **Despite agreeing to these moves toward justice, Harris County remains at a standstill.**

The Flood Control District has moved quickly to get projects started (nearly half the bond money is out the door), but has dragged its feet on implementing true equity. A critical unanswered question is: How is Harris County ensuring we are not repeating [national patterns of racial discrimination](#)? How does the community know if whiter and higher-income communities are being served with large-scale projects while black, brown and low-income neighborhoods continue to get studies or plans? There is a lack of transparency about who is protected from flooding and where the large investments are made. This is business as usual, and it's perpetuating the systemic racism that got us here in the first place.

A proposed Infrastructure Resilience Team is making its way to Commissioners Court for approval tomorrow. It would be staffed by four County employees, with no representation for the community. **The proposed Infrastructure Resilience Team misses the mark on including and centering people over projects, as well as undoing the environmental racism that harms our neighbors.**

"The Infrastructure Resilience Team uses resilience as a buzz word," said CEER Coalition Director Iris Gonzalez. "It's time to take action and address the issues head-on, with community at the decision-making table to hold our leaders and municipalities accountable. We can't ignore the history of environmental racism that created the unfair conditions we see today. Neighborhoods like Kashmere Gardens have failing drainage infrastructure while other communities are ten times more protected. This is a direct result of a legacy of racist policies and practices."

Our government departments are using the word “equity” without truly understanding it or committing to the racial justice actions that must come with it. We need a place for real dialogue and accountability. The Harris Thrives Resolution was a meaningful step towards racial justice - let’s honor that with meaningful actions. **We need a Community Task Force that brings together the community and the County Departments who are supposed to serve them.** Community members with lived experience of flooding are experts and deserve equal footing alongside engineers who have been tasked to work with these communities.

“There are Task Forces being stood up left and right in this moment of racial justice, but not all of them are effective,” said HOME Coalition Director Chrishelle Palay. “We have proposed a Task Force that will ask the hard questions, engage in learning about anti-racism, and hold our County accountable with tools and metrics created by impacted communities.”

We need to shift the systems that don’t work and have never worked for black, brown, asian and fellow communities of color. Tell Harris County Commissioners to take racism out of how we deal with our flooding problem:

- Fulfill the promise of the Harris Thrives Resolution. Stand up a re-imagined Community Task Force now. Adopt bylaws that give the Task Force meaningful power to create change within Harris County.
- Fund the Task Force to bring on an outside facilitator to ensure it’s an effective body.
- Commit funding for anti-racism trainings for Engineering, Community Services, Flood Control, and other county departments.
- Instruct the Infrastructure Resilience Team to collaborate with the Community Task Force to create and implement anti-racist policies at multiple levels.

The Infrastructure Resilience Team may be a good first step to dismantle bureaucratic silos, but we need assurances. **We need a commitment to anti-racism, so that no community in Harris County is left behind.** Tomorrow, Harris County has a choice to perpetuate systemic racism in our flooding processes or dismantle it. Black, brown and asian communities that worry every time it rains deserve to not just survive hurricane season but to thrive in Harris County. Stand up a Community Task Force that can lead Harris County into a future where our black, brown and asian communities can thrive.

The Coalition for Environment, Equity and Resilience (CEER) and the Houston Organizing Movement for Equity (HOME) are two coalitions working in partnership for a more just, equitable and resilient Houston region.

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