SPECIAL REPORT

A city falling apart: Why New Orleans fails to stay dry, functional despite billions in funding

By JOSEPH CRANNEY | Staff writer
Jun 27, 2024

Subscriber Exclusive

Temporary barricades and fencing blocks access to homes on Spain Street in the St. Roch area in New Orleans on May 31, 2024.

STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

Renata Young blocks her front door with sandbags when it rains.

During a recent downpour, the water near her home in Treme was pooled ankle-high above each of the block's four overwhelmed catch basins.

More than three years ago, a neighbor complained to City Hall that one of the basins on North Robertson Street was clogged with concrete a contractor had poured down the drain. A crew inspected the drain in 2020, but the city hasn't been back since.

Young, 59, a retired nurse practitioner, has had to replace her hardwood floors twice in the last decade.

"I am trapped in my own house when it floods," she said.

BROKEN CITY

Inside New Orleans' chronic dysfunction

Read more:

New Orleans faces massive flooding risks. But City Hall can't keep storm drains clear.

His job helps keep New Orleans streets from flooding. There are few like him left.

Young's predicament is just one among many signs of a city breaking down, a dysfunction that's pervasive and, at times, dangerous.

The evidence is stark and overwhelming.

Last year, the city's beleaguered public works department was able to unclog just 2% of the city's storm drains — less than a tenth of what City Hall accomplished just a few years ago.

Need a pothole filled in New Orleans? On average, city records show, that now takes about a full year. In Baton Rouge, or Nashville, Tennessee, it's roughly two weeks.

New Orleans has 460 signalized intersections and more than 54,000 streetlights — and employs just two people to ensure they're working. On a bustling thoroughfare like Claiborne Avenue, some broken lights have stayed dangerously dark for months.

A New Orleans Emergency Medical Services ambulance tries to race through traffic exacerbated by closed lanes on South Claiborne Avenue in New Orleans on Wednesday, May 15, 2024.

STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

"It's un-freaking real," said lawyer Gilbert Buras, who worked under the city attorney and the Civil Service Commission for four different mayors.

"You used to not mind that New Orleans was so dysfunctional because it was so cheap to live here," he said. "Now I don't know what they're doing with the money they get."

Since Hurricane Katrina, only New York — with 20 times as many people — has collected more in major disaster relief from the federal government than New Orleans, with billions of dollars earmarked for fixing up the city's streets, drainage system, government buildings and other public works here.

Yet that infrastructure continues to deteriorate.

The city does face distinct challenges related to the upkeep of its 19th-century infrastructure, in particular a swampy terrain that in many parts of the city has been steadily sinking for decades.

But some problems have directly resulted from a string of disastrous policy decisions.

The public works department inherited from the Sewerage & Water Board the responsibility of maintaining most of the city's drainage system in 1991, a duty that came without money because voters didn't renew a long-assessed tax. The department has been chronically underfunded and undermanned largely ever since.

As hiring skilled laborers got more difficult in the late 1990s, public works officials began outsourcing core functions. Now, City Hall relies heavily on contractors for basic jobs like filling potholes or clearing storm drains, even as top administrators acknowledge — as officials elsewhere have — it's quicker and easier to handle routine maintenance in house.

City Hall has a multi-billion dollar plan to replace damaged infrastructure across New Orleans, but city officials said they've spent only around 40% of the latest $1.4 billion batch of federal aid — sent eight years ago.

A sign on Orleans Avenue posted by City Hall, touting a road construction project, is badly leaning and marked with graffiti.

STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

The result? While local tax collections have risen by nearly half in constant dollars over the last couple of decades, New Orleans has been backsliding badly when it comes to delivering the meat and potatoes of local government, such as paving roads, filling potholes, clearing drains and repairing broken traffic signals.

Consider:

- It takes the city, on average, 355 days to fill a pothole upon a citizen's request, 311 data collected by The Times-Picayune shows. That's much worse than any comparable city in the South. Louisville, Kentucky, and Miami do it within a couple weeks. Memphis, Tennessee? Five days.
- Even with $10 million in dedicated funding, city crews last year cleared just 1,500 of the city's 72,000 catch basins, the first line of defense in the city's all-important drainage system. The city has ramped things up in the first half of this year, but to clear every one at current rates would still take a decade.
- In 1995, the public works department's maintenance yard had more than 175 workers. Now it's down to fewer than 30, leaving it with a smaller in-house team than St. Bernard Parish. "Oh, my God," the parish president there said. "That's impossible."
- The city's traffic signal shop is so understaffed that whenever a light requires emergency repairs, officials are forced to go through the weekslong process of hiring a contractor. The last three times the city sought bids for light repairs, no one responded.

- Over the last 15 years, invoices show the city has paid at least $2.9 million to consultants who all sounded similar alarms about flooding risks. One warned that a 10-year storm would threaten at least 40% of the city with standing water of up to 3 feet. The city briefly boosted its unclogging efforts, but never approached the yearly rate that consultants said was necessary. Under Mayor LaToya Cantrell, the city has backslid badly.

Decades of deferred maintenance

The fallout of this dysfunction is borne by New Orleanians everywhere, in a thousand ways, large and small — from flat tires, busted axles and sky-high insurance, to the stress of helplessly watching floodwaters approach the stoop in a routine afternoon shower.

The Times-Picayune has repeatedly sought comment from Cantrell since mid-April. After she declined to be interviewed, a reporter shared a summary of this article's findings with the mayor's communications team. A representative said Cantrell has nothing to add beyond what her aides have said.

Gilbert Montaño, Cantrell's chief administrative officer, said the city has fallen behind on routine maintenance in large part because of losses in the workforce and supply chain delays caused by the pandemic.

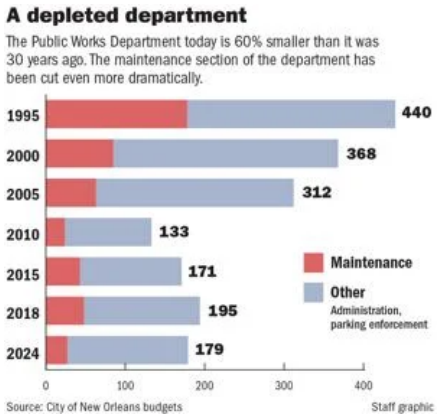
New Orleans faces massive flooding risks. But City Hall can't keep storm drains clear.

Montaño said those challenges are compounded by a tangled web of regulations set by the Civil Service Commission, an independent agency that screens the vast majority of hires at City Hall.

"We are recovering, like most cities, from decades of deferred maintenance," Montaño said, adding that the Cantrell administration recently brought on a new public works director.

Clinton “Rick” Hathaway, hired in December, became the fourth person to hold that job in as many years. An engineer, Hathaway was the maintenance chief in the 1990s for what was then called the streets department, when it had more than 100 frontline workers.

Hathaway said he’d ideally like to have about double that number of people in the field, which would bring New Orleans more in line with its peers in the South. But it would require a tenfold increase from today’s staffing levels.



Hathaway recently committed to adding 16 maintenance workers, which would grow the frontline staff by about 60%, but would still leave the department with fewer than one-fifth the number Jefferson Parish employs.

State and local officials also recently announced more than 400 infrastructure and beautification projects they say they’ll complete before New Orleans hosts Super Bowl LIX in February. However, they haven't released a detailed list, and many of those projects appear largely cosmetic, such as adding murals to blighted downtown buildings or clearing homeless encampments.

Hathaway said his department is making progress in the meantime through the federally subsidized Joint Infrastructure Recovery Request program. The program includes more than 270 streets, drainage and other maintenance projects, though city officials recently acknowledged that a quarter of those projects are on hold because of cost overruns.

“Things are happening,” Hathaway said. “It’s not dire straits.”

Vexing challenges

Some of New Orleans’ challenges, while vexing, are not unique among American cities.

Like many older towns, New Orleans’ population peaked more than half a century ago, at 630,000. Today, just over half that many people live here.

Some New Orleans potholes last so long that they become part of the cityscape. Occasionally, they acquire sardonic decorations, like this one at the corner of Constance and Dufossat streets.

STAFF PHOTO BY GORDON RUSSELL

Integration, suburbanization and the interstate highways unleashed a wave of White flight, and with it, much of the city’s wealth.

Even as the population shriveled, the city’s developed footprint grew: Hundreds of miles of new streets and pipes and canals and other infrastructure needed to be maintained.

Ironically, the growth was only possible because of advances in drainage New Orleans made during the 20th century. The Wood screw pump allowed city leaders to dewater the backswamp, making areas that for two centuries had been considered uninhabitable fit for settlement.

The then-prosperous city soon spread far from its original hub along the natural levee hugging the Mississippi River.

But the drainage revolution had unforeseen effects. Depriving the former swamp of water caused the land to sink, slowly but dramatically. The subsidence causes roads to buckle and ancient pipes — some made of terra cotta — to crack.

Lakeview residents walk through construction materials en route to their cars on May 15, 2024.

STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

The consequences today are clear in newer sections of town like Gentilly, where — funded with a tranche of federal relief dollars — the city has torn up huge chunks of the residential streets between Gentilly Boulevard and the lake.

Kevin Bozant, a retired graphic designer, said he welcomes the improvements on his block of Painters Street. But it's also been a hassle.

On a recent afternoon, he said the street had been off-limits to traffic since the fall, forcing the area's many older residents to park on neighboring streets.

Bozant, 71, said he took a fall while towing his trash cans around the corner, after one wheel got caught on construction netting.

"It's good, I guess, in the long run," he said. "It's a pain in the ass for now."

Politics at play

As the city's footprint expanded in the last decades of the 20th century, its taxpayers continued to leave. Those who remained grew less willing or able to pay for upkeep, which only made things worse.

Political timidity was also part of the equation.

Unlike water boards in other cities, the S&WB's rates were capped under the Louisiana constitution, which meant increases had to be approved by state lawmakers.

The Legislature — and later the City Council — largely declined to increase water and sewer rates for most of the 20th century, according to a study by the nonprofit Bureau of Governmental Research, which concluded that political pressure was a key reason for the S&WB's historic lack of funding.

Then, in 1991, New Orleans voters declined to renew a 100-year-old tax that supported drainage work.

In response, S&WB officials handed over the operation and maintenance of roughly two-thirds of the city's stormwater management.

Just like that, City Hall became responsible for tens of thousands of catch basins and roughly 1,200 miles of underground pipelines — with no additional money to deal with them.

"From that point, it's been an uphill battle to solve the problem," said Cedric Grant, a former deputy mayor who oversaw public works and the S&WB under Mayor Mitch Landrieu.

State and local officials recently advanced plans to return maintenance of that infrastructure back into the S&WB's hands. But it's not clear how or if that will be funded, with the S&WB estimating it needs at least $30 million for catch basin maintenance.

A major boost came recently through the city's share of pandemic relief money, $10 million of which the City Council set aside in 2022 solely for the purpose of clearing catch basins.

His job helps keep New Orleans streets from flooding. There are few like him left.

But not a dollar of it was spent until this spring.

Joe Threat, Cantrell's infrastructure chief, has vowed that the city's crews — along with the help of contractors — will clear 7,500 catch basins by

the end of the year.

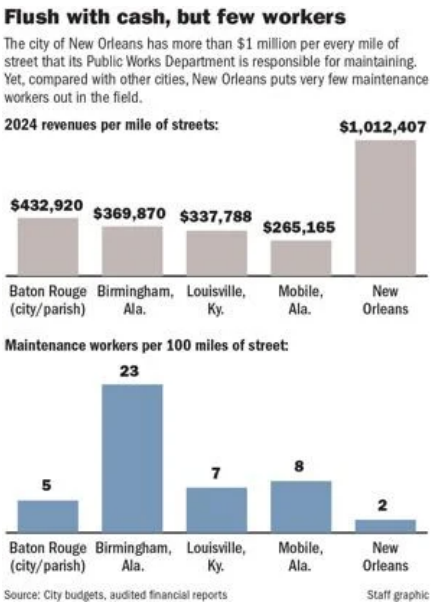
But Threat also acknowledged that the public works department is overwhelmed by a backlog of complaints. In late May, Threat asked residents to stop filing complaints about catch basins and contact their local council representatives instead.

More money

Just as it would be facile to blame all of New Orleans' woes on the city's swampy foundation, it would be an oversimplification to chalk up the sorry state of its infrastructure to a lack of money.

For one, the city's revenue picture has dramatically improved.

After an overhaul of property assessments, City Hall now takes in about $190 million a year in property taxes. That's 43% more in constant dollars than it brought in two decades ago — to serve a population that's shrunk by roughly a quarter.



On top of that, the city's budget this year is stuffed with more than $300 million in federal grants, an amount that dwarfs any American city of comparable size.

New Orleans' $1.5 billion budget is twice as big as that of Memphis; almost three times the size of Birmingham, Alabama; five times the size of Charleston, South Carolina.

'Absurd' staffing

Instead, the problems stem partly from a quiet, yet significant, change in the way the city spends its money over the last generation — in a way that impedes basic tasks from getting done.

Under Mayor Marc Morial in the 1990s, though the city had far less money, the public works department spent almost twice as much on its personnel as it does today and employed six times as many maintenance workers, records show.

“That’s absolutely absurd,” Morial said, when told of today’s numbers. Even in lean economic times, keeping stoplights working and streets passable always remained a priority, said Morial, who served from 1994 to 2002.

“Basic city services, you have to do that first,” said Morial, now the president of the National Urban League. “Police, fire, streets — that’s what people pay taxes for.”

An Edible Flowers delivery driver, top center, had to walk through a maze of road construction to get to a home in the Lakeview neighborhood on May 15, 2024.

STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

New Orleans didn't simply cut services — it outsourced them, in many cases, an effort that accelerated around when Morial left office. Buras, the former deputy city attorney, said officials were trying to save money by avoiding workers' compensation claims and tightening the city's pension rolls.

Hiring private companies also allowed City Hall to avoid what officials describe as a burdensome civil service system that was designed, at least in part, to defeat the patronage politics that defined the era of Huey P. Long.

Striking shifts

It's difficult to determine just how much the public works department has relied on contractors because — unlike many local governments — New Orleans doesn't itemize the expenses in its budget and hasn't for the last 30 years.

But payroll records and archived city budgets show a striking shift in the city's in-house capabilities.

Street flooding in Treme on April 10, 2024.

STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

The city has more than 1,500 miles of streets and is down to just one full-time pothole crew. The city recently spent more than $1.1 million on four catch basin trucks, but doesn't have the manpower to staff all of them full time.

Even the council's budget chair, Council member Joe Giarrusso, said he was unaware of the extent to which the public works department has been diminished.

"Many of us would prefer to have these services in-house," Giarrusso said.

Raising alarms

The city's outsourcing of public works has helped create a huge and growing backlog of routine maintenance.

For a generation, outside consultants have been raising alarms about what the BGR has called the "deplorable" conditions of the city's streets, drainage system and other infrastructure.

A 2016 study gave about two-thirds of the roads in New Orleans a failing grade, or said they don't meet today's minimum standards.

Crystal Hidalgo attempts to unclog a catch basin in Treme on April 10, 2024.

STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

By the city's own estimates, every dollar invested in preventive maintenance can save $4 or $5 in repair costs down the road. Yet for every dollar that officials say is needed, the council budgets only about 16 cents a year, according to research by the BGR.

In 2019, voters rejected a tax hike that would have brought in an estimated $50 million over the last five years for routine maintenance. Voters did approve $500 million in bond sales that officials said would be spent on large capital improvements, including drainage projects.

Backsliding badly

The results haven't gotten any better: The number of potholes filled annually has fallen by 35% over the last decade, audit reports show. Similarly, the number of streetlight outages restored each year dropped by 84%.

A NOLA sign in the front yard of a Lakeview home surrounded by street construction on May 15, 2024.

STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

Perhaps no issue is as urgent for New Orleans as flooding, against which the city's catch basins provide a first line of defense. Yet the city this year says crews will unclog only 1 in 10 of them — and that would represent a huge improvement from last year.

Even so, it's well short of the city's previously stated goal of about 1 in 5, which was achieved the last full year under Landrieu, records show.

"If not for the engineering, there's no reason anybody in the world should live in New Orleans," said Grant, the former public works czar.

Even with the engineering, Grant said, "it needs to be maintained to survive."

Rising waters

Too often, that's not happening. In Treme, residents say they're as worried as ever that the city is failing to protect their homes from floodwaters.

A neighborhood group, which was formed three decades ago to address the historic area's lack of economic development and affordable housing, has shifted its focus to drainage.

Fed up with the lack of response from the city, the Greater Treme Consortium does what it can. The group's director, Cheryl Austin, said they've installed more than 60 rain barrels, rain gardens, French drains and planter boxes designed to capture stormwater.

They've also planted 50 trees and removed 900 square feet of concrete, which exacerbates flooding, Austin said.

Cheryl Austin, director of the Greater Treme Consortium, watches her neighborhood flood on April 10, 2024.

STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

In the fall, the group hosted a workshop that trained Treme residents on steps they can take to help.

Austin was standing in heavy rain that pooled around her ankles during a recent storm when one of the flyers she handed out for that event floated past her.

She could only laugh.

Staff writer Jeff Adelson contributed to this report.

To learn more, ***please click here.***

MORE INFORMATION

How long does it take New Orleans to fix a pothole? What about a broken red light?

Tags Hardwall

https://www.nola.com/news/politics/new-orleans-has-hundreds-of-broken-fire-hydrants/article_6b28531a-50ea-11ef-959c-b3b4d307c9e8.html

Hundreds of New Orleans fire hydrants are broken or faulty. 'It's not acceptable.'

By JOSEPH CRANNEY AND JEFF ADELSON | Staff writers

Aug 8, 2024

Subscriber Exclusive

1 of 2

Two fire hydrants on the 3400 block of Magnolia Street were not functioning when this house erupted in flames in April 2023, making it a challenge for firefighters to put out the fire.

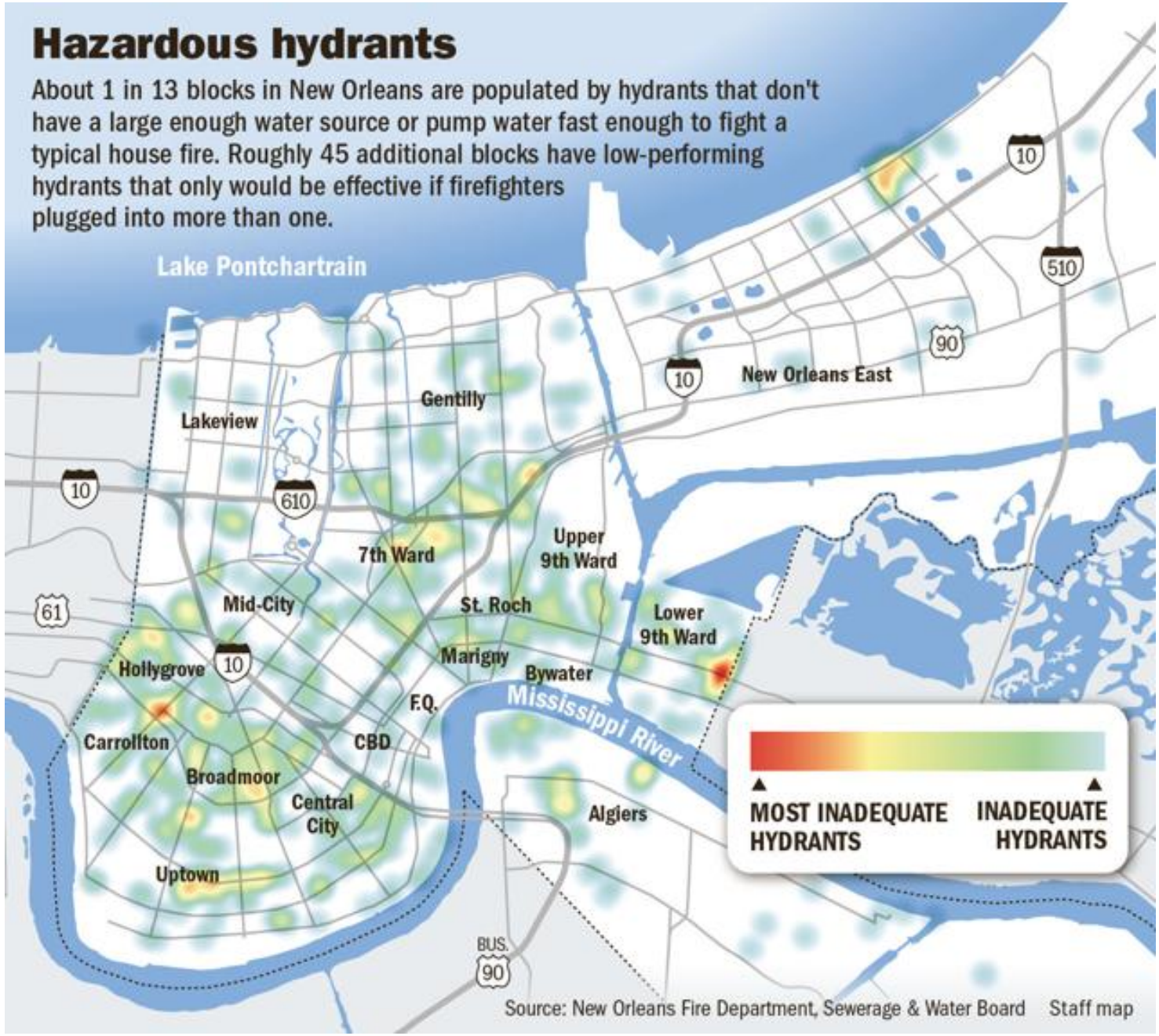
More than 700 blocks across New Orleans have dead or malfunctioning fire hydrants and lack any that are up to the task of fighting a typical house fire.

That includes more than 500 hydrants that are missing or completely broken, along with hundreds of others with inadequate pressure or water supply, according to a Times-Picayune analysis of city data.

The hazards are more prevalent in the city's older neighborhoods, where the infrastructure is more antiquated.

New Orleans Fire Department officials say the problem has not caused a widespread issue of out-of-control fires. House fires are far less common here than they used to be, too.

Officials from the Sewerage & Water Board, responsible for maintaining hydrants, said firefighters can achieve an adequate flow as long as any well-functioning hydrant is within 1,000 feet of the fire, or by combining the flow of multiple hydrants. However, that takes more time.


Hazardous hydrants
About 1 in 13 blocks in New Orleans are populated by hydrants that don't have a large enough water source or pump water fast enough to fight a typical house fire. Roughly 45 additional blocks have low-performing hydrants that only would be effective if firefighters plugged into more than one.
Lake Pontchartrain
Lakeview
Gentilly
New Orleans East
7th Ward
Upper 9th Ward
Mid-City
St. Roch
Lower 9th Ward
Marigny
Bywater
Hollygrove
F.Q.
Mississippi River
Carrollton
CBD
Broadmoor
Central City
Algiers
Uptown
BUS. 90
10
610
61
90
510
MOST INADEQUATE HYDRANTS
INADEQUATE HYDRANTS
Source: New Orleans Fire Department, Sewerage & Water Board
Staff map

A four-alarm house fire that Barbara Corley escaped in Central City last year illustrates the risks.

The closest hydrant to that fire, at the corner of Magnolia and Amelia streets, was broken. And, firefighters later said, the pressure at the next closest hydrant was feeble. Corley described it as a “sprinkle.”

Firefighters scrambled to pump water from their engines and connect to other hydrants around the corner.

A running fire hydrant at the corner of Second and Freret streets in New Orleans, photographed on Sept. 30, 2022.
STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

The fire raged for two hours, consuming the Corley house, a wood-framed shotgun where the family lived for 40 years. There were no reported injuries, but the fire also destroyed another home next door, damaged two others and reportedly displaced at least a dozen people.

The head of the local fire union said malfunctioning hydrants are an all-too common problem. And even though the fire department sends weekly reports of faulty hydrants to S&WB, it often takes more than two months for that agency to make repairs.

Over his 27-year career here, Capt. Aaron Mischler, the fire union president, said he's been on the scene of countless fires where the closest hydrants are leaking, have broken caps or weak pressure. He recalled one hydrant that was in such bad shape that, when firefighters tried opening the cap, they yanked the hydrant clear out of the ground.

Residents look at the remains of a bedroom after a fire in the 3400 block of Magnolia Street on April 24, 2023. Two fire hydrants on this block were not functioning, making it a challenge for firefighters to put the fire out quickly.

Staff photo by Chris Granger NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune

He said the resulting delays are critical because fires can double in size every 60 seconds.

“The fact that the first two hydrants were dead — that’s a huge detriment,” Mischler said of the Corley fire. Fire Superintendent Roman Nelson said heavy winds, not broken hydrants, were the main reason that fire spread.

Poor flow

In a recent statement, Nelson said he doesn’t believe faulty hydrants are a significant problem.

“The NOFD has no concerns related to water flow for the purpose of firefighting in the City of New Orleans,” Nelson said.

Though New Orleans has a well-deserved reputation for crumbling infrastructure, the effect that the city's old pipes and poor water flow can have on fire protection have drawn little notice.

New Orleans firefighters on the scene of a major fire in the 3400 block of Magnolia Street on April 24, 2023. Two fire hydrants on this block were not functioning making it a challenge for firefighters to put out the fire quickly.

Staff photo by Chris Granger NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune

The Times-Picayune identified problematic hydrants by combining databases from NOFD and S&WB, reviewing fire reports and interviewing firefighters and fire analysts.

Among the findings:

— At least 703 blocks in New Orleans are populated by hydrants that collectively don't have a large enough water source, don't pump water fast enough to fight a typical house fire or don't work at all. That's about 1 in 13 of all city blocks for which data was available. Firefighters say they have tools to boost water pressure and that they can always quickly pump water from their trucks. But that water source can run out within a minute.

— Roughly 45 additional blocks have low-performing hydrants that only would be effective if firefighters plugged into more than one. Firefighters say that's not an uncommon way to achieve adequate flow, but it costs time.

— The majority of water mains in New Orleans — about 60% — have a diameter of 6 inches, considered the minimum size by national fire standards. New water mains are built to a size of at least 8 inches, though only a little more than a third in New Orleans are that big, records show.

— No fewer than 500 of the city's hydrants, or about 3%, are missing or don't work at all, according to the most recent NOFD inspection data.

New Orleans firefighters on the scene of a fire on the 3400 block of Magnolia Street in New Orleans on April 24, 2023. Two fire hydrants on this block were not functioning, making it a challenge for firefighters to put out the fire.

Staff photo by Chris Granger NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune

Firefighters keep plans that identify water sources for large fires at commercial buildings, like a high-rise apartment or the Superdome, which allows them to “easily locate and utilize hydrants with higher water flow,” said Capt. Edwin Holmes, a department spokesperson.

But they often don't have that information in residential neighborhoods, where buildings lack sprinkler systems and where many of the city's oldest and least effective hydrants are located.

Finding an adequate water supply "at most residential responses isn't an issue," Holmes said.

Mischler sees things quite differently.

"It's a huge issue," he said. "And it's not acceptable."

A spokesperson for Mayor LaToya Cantrell said Cantrell declined to comment and referred questions to the S&WB.

Broken, missing and underperforming hydrants in New Orleans

Hundreds of fire hydrants across New Orleans are either broken or missing (red), flow at a substandard rate (orange), or are connected to mains that have poor water supply (yellow).

Source: City of New Orleans, Sewerage & Water Board • Times-Picayune staff graphic

Lagging response

Steve Nelson, the S&WB superintendent who started the job in January, called hydrants “a key focus” of the agency’s work.

He noted that New Orleans has the top rating from the state property insurance association that grades fire protection, though the city hasn’t been assessed since 2019.

The fire department inspects all of the city’s roughly 14,000 fire hydrants and updates S&WB every week with maintenance needs.

Still, the average overall response time for repairs is 75 days, S&WB officials said.

“Firefighters, we feel like we’re taking on other people’s work in doing (inspections),” Mischler said, noting that the hydrants are S&WB’s property. “Because it’s important to us to do it. That’s our lifeblood. We can’t operate without water.”

“We would expect that if we tell you there’s a problem, we expect it to be fixed in a timely manner,” Mischler added. “Seventy-five days isn’t timely.”

Barbara Corley stands next to one of two fire hydrants that were not working when a fire consumed her nearby house in the 3400 block of Magnolia Street in New Orleans last year.

(Photo by Chris Granger The Times-Picayune)

Nelson said that average includes non-priority repairs, like minor leaks. He acknowledged that 75 days is “too long” and said his goal is for the agency to complete repairs within 30 days. The most critical repairs are addressed on an accelerated schedule, Nelson said.

“Any out-of-service hydrant is one that we want to address quickly,” Nelson said. “We are staffing and equipping our team to reduce average timelines for lower priority items and ensuring prompt response for (urgent) repairs.”

Decline in services

When it comes to the maintenance of the city’s all-important drainage system, the split of authority between the S&WB and the city has proven disastrous.

The city's public works department took over maintenance responsibilities for most of New Orleans' stormwater management system 30 years ago. The department has been understaffed and underfunded ever since.

As City Hall has increasingly relied on contractors to do basic jobs, the city has been backsliding badly in getting those tasks completed.

Last year, the city unclogged just 2% of its catch basins, the first line of defense against flooding, The Times-Picayune has reported. And it takes the city, on average, about a year to fill a pothole upon a citizen's complaint, a job other cities routinely do within a couple weeks.

That's all despite an increase in local tax collections of almost 50% in constant dollars over the last two decades, along with billions of dollars in federal relief set aside for infrastructure improvements.

A pile of old furniture dumped next to a fire hydrant at the intersection of Race and Constance streets on Aug. 6, 2024.

(Photo by Chris Granger The Times-Picayune)

As for the city's hydrants?

The Fire Department conducts visual inspections every year. About 1 in 5 undergo more extensive annual testing designed to flag hydrants that have poor flow, like one of those by the Corley house.

Council member Oliver Thomas, who chairs the council's Public Works Committee, said the issues are just another sign of the beleaguered state of the city's services.

"You can't talk about what's rare when systems don't work, or when systems aren't dependable," Thomas said.

"Fire hydrants out, lights out, roadways out — at some point, if everything is out, that means the whole city is out," he added.

Hydrant hazards

NOFD responds to an average of around 300 residential fires a year. Two decades ago, it was more than 700.

In Detroit, a city of similar age that has far greater arson rates than New Orleans, broken or malfunctioning fire hydrants have proven to be a significant barrier to fire protection.

A 2015 report found that nearly two-thirds of Detroit's hydrants were broken or had inadequate pressure to extinguish an average house fire. The fire department there lost control of hundreds of fires at least in part because of those issues, the report found.

At the Corley fire in Central City, after the first hydrant didn't work, firefighters tried pumping from an engine, but soon ran out of water, firefighters later said in reports. Firefighters "made attempts to get water," while the fire spread to a second house.

“I smelled the smoke and ran outside and saw all the firefighters saying, 'Do you have water, do you have water?'” Henry Offiah, who lived in a neighboring apartment, told a reporter at the time. “And I was very shocked — why do you firefighters need water?”

Barbara Corley said she often walks around the foundation of her old home in the 3400 block of Magnolia Street in New Orleans looking for any small personal items that might resurface in the mud. Last year, the house she had lived in for 40 years burned to ashes after two nearby fire hydrants on this street were not working.

(Photo by Chris Granger The Times-Picayune)

Since the fire, Corley, 81, a retired caterer, has been living with a neighbor across the street. She had amassed a collection of antique furniture, dining sets and artwork that filled the front and dining rooms of her house, a hobby she started decades ago when her uncle worked at a thrift store on Freret Street.

There was nothing left but ashes. “I stood and watched my whole life go up in flames,” she said.

A year later, Corley occasionally walks the grass lot where her house stood, hoping to find an old piece of her jewelry.

Rodents, leaks and busted AC: New Orleans is full of rundown government buildings

By JOSEPH CRANNEY | Staff writer

Oct 19, 2024

Subscriber Exclusive

An Evacuspot, left, covered in graffiti in front of a New Orleans Fire Station surrounded by construction fencing located at the corner of St. Claude and Poland avenues in New Orleans in October 2024. (Photo by Chris Granger, The Times-Picayune)

STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

New Orleans has a massive backlog of more than $200 million in needed maintenance to the city's hundreds of public properties, including police and fire stations, government offices, public health clinics, homeless shelters, cemeteries, courthouses, libraries, pools, parks and other facilities.

The rundown conditions are apparent everywhere.

City records show half-century-old government buildings are plagued by rodents, shoddy air conditioning and leaking ceilings. Rainwater has poured into some fire stations through torn roofs.

While New Orleans kids were out of school this summer, six of the city's 14 outdoor pools were closed pending construction or repairs, according to the parks and recreation department.

Workers complain of toxic mold in homeless shelters and broken hand-washing stations at public health clinics. About a dozen libraries and police precincts temporarily shut down in the past two summers because they couldn't keep their air conditioners working.

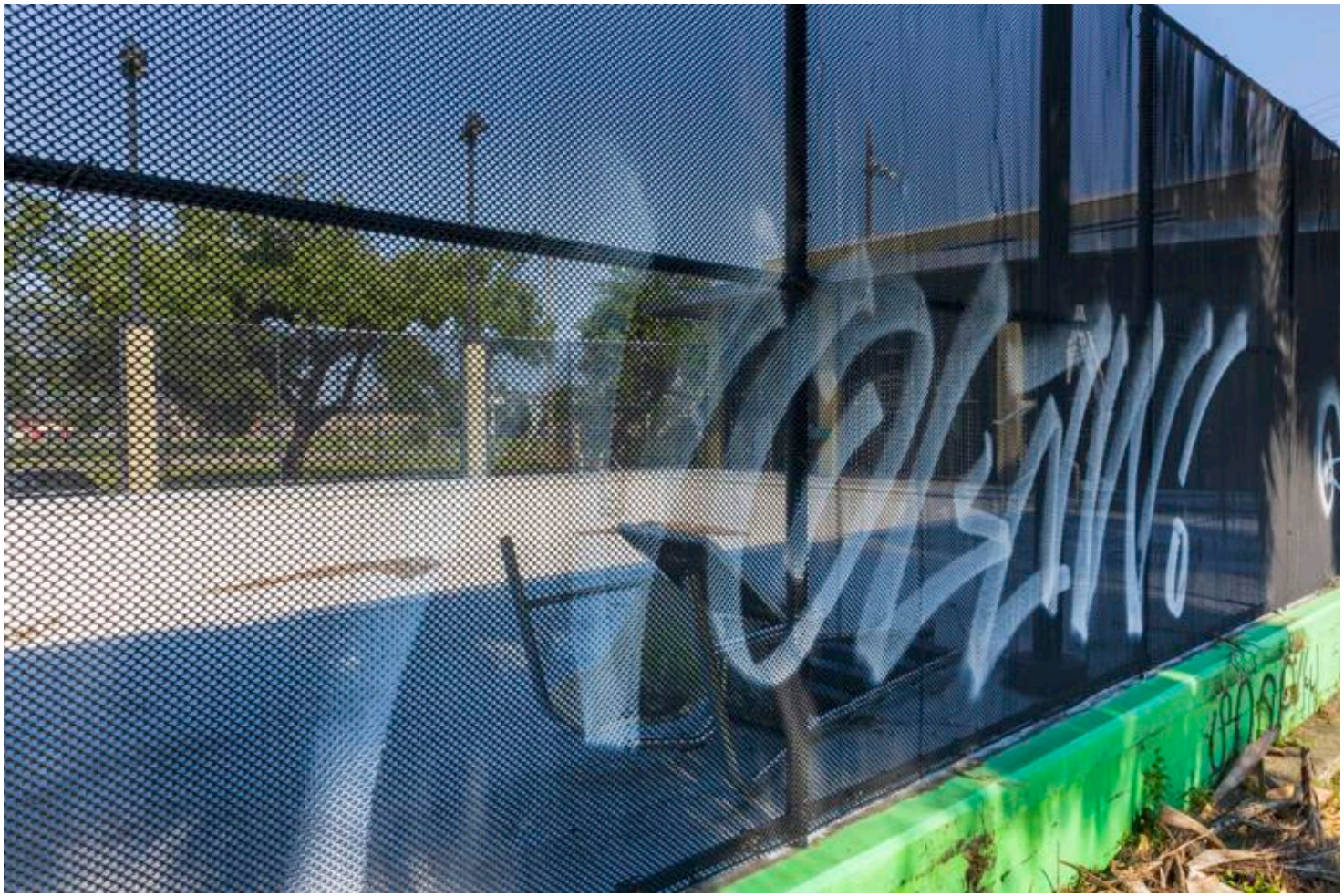
Read more:

New Orleans faces massive flooding risks. But City Hall can't keep storm drains clear.

His job helps keep New Orleans streets from flooding. There are few like him left.

And in a horrifying example last year: A city tree, which officials knew was decaying and dangerous, shed a massive limb that crushed a teenager in bustling Jackson Square.

Joe Threat, as the chief administrator of infrastructure and property management, is responsible for overseeing the city's roughly 440 properties. He said the city is spending tens of millions of dollars on renovations to police and fire stations. The city is also rebuilding its municipal court, which has operated temporarily out of a city Veterans Affairs office since Hurricane Ida in 2021.



The Lemann Pool sits empty and covered in graffiti on the Lafitte Greenway in New Orleans in October 2024. (Photo by Chris Granger, The Times-Picayune)

STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

The city is failing in the routine upkeep of the many government buildings and public facilities, critics say, pointing to neighborhoods like Central City, where all summer, the two pools and the library were shuttered.

Keely Lewis, president of the Faubourg Lafayette Community Association in Central City, said after the city couldn't offer summer activities out of its closed facilities, she saw neighborhood kids roaming the streets in the scorching heat.

And during power outages or heat advisories, the neighborhood lacked public spaces where homeless people and other vulnerable residents could cool off.

"We need to work on making our city one that people actually want to be in," Lewis said.

Major needs, few workers

The problems aren't because of a lack of money.

Voters in 2021 approved a ballot measure authorizing $500 million in bond issuances, a little less than half of which officials earmarked for building renovations and other improvements. About $285 million has already been disbursed.

Instead, like other problems plaguing the city's infrastructure, the issues stem from understaffing.

Other local governments keep buildings up and running with a staff of trained workers who handle repairs that require immediate attention.

Jefferson Parish has a squadron of roughly 40 trade workers, for instance. Baton Rouge has more than 20.

Two decades ago, civil service records show City Hall employed more than 30 electricians, carpenters and general maintenance workers. Now, the city's property management department has one carpenter and no electricians. There are two plumbers and zero HVAC technicians.

The city relies heavily on contractors to make repairs, a cumbersome process that can delay jobs for weeks or even months if contractors aren't immediately willing or able to do the work.

"They're trying to cover a 12-by-14 floor with a 3-by-5 rug," said Joe Bonney, president of Friends of The Algiers Courthouse. The historic courthouse is owned by the city, but Bonney's group has raised its own money for the last 30 years to ensure the structure doesn't join other city properties in a state of disrepair.

A broken window, center, and the top of the Algiers Courthouse in October 2024. (Photo by Chris Granger, The Times-Picayune)

STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

Mayor LaToya Cantrell declined to be interviewed for this article. A city spokesperson said officials increased their maintenance budget last year and the mayor's proposed budget for the upcoming year includes a sizable 47% increase.

"We anticipate that this investment will help the department become more proactive in its approach to maintenance of city-owned buildings," spokesperson Leatrice Dupre said. "The City of New Orleans will continue to make strategic investments in our workforce that will help us attract talented trade staff."

Most of the additional money is likely to be spent on contracts, however, and the mayor has proposed spending 6% less on that department's personnel costs.

Carpenters for the city start at $39,400 a year, below the state average of about $44,000, and plumbers start at $55,700, below the average for licensed plumbers of around $59,000. Master plumbers make far more.

Costly problems

Because of the lack of workers, and contracting processes that can be time-consuming, problems persist and maintenance requests build up.

In the last 18 months, city employees requested maintenance or assistance from the city's Department of Property Management more than 10,000 times, records show, or an average of more than 20 per workday.

Joe Threat, New Orleans' deputy chief administrative officer for infrastructure, stands in front of City Hall on Friday, Sept. 30, 2022.

STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

More than three-quarters were routine requests like replacing a lightbulb, fixing broken door locks or paint jobs.

Nearly 1 in 10 — about two a day — involved more serious workplace hazards like mold, leaking ceilings, broken sinks and toilets or raw sewage backups.

When Ed Carlson, director of Odyssey House Louisiana, visited the city's troubled low-barrier homeless shelter on Gravier Street in March, he found it full of leaks, rodents and broken toilets and washing machines.

Because of all the issues, Carlson estimated it would cost about $7.8 million for his homeless advocacy group to take over managing the building from the city and fix it up.

The city spent $6 million in repairs after the air conditioning system at police headquarters collapsed last summer. In March, Chief Administrative Officer Gilbert Montaño's announced that headquarters would move to a private office tower downtown, where he said rent is cheaper than renovations.

“As bad as (police) headquarters is, almost every other building is just as bad,” Montaño said at the time.

An incident in Jackson Square last year was a tragic example of what can happen when the problems aren’t quickly addressed, and how much it costs taxpayers.

A large, decaying oak tree partially collapsed just steps from St. Louis Cathedral, crushing a teenager who is now permanently disabled.

The city recently agreed to pay the family a $4.8 million settlement, records show.

The Nora Nova Library at 1902 St. Bernard Avenue in New Orleans in October 2024. (Photo by Chris Granger, The Times-Picayune)

STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

Meanwhile, libraries in Central City, Uptown and the 7th Ward closed this summer because of mold or broken air conditioners that the city couldn't quickly fix or replace.

Two of those also closed in the summer of 2023, along with libraries in Algiers, Broadmoor and intermittent closures at the main campus downtown.

Shut down

New Orleans Recreation Development (NORD) CEO Larry Barabino, Jr. speaks during a ribbon cutting ceremony for the phase 1 renovation of the George Washington Carver Playground in New Orleans, Tuesday, July 2, 2024. (Photo by Sophia Germer, The Times-Picayune)

STAFF PHOTO BY SOPHIA GERMER

The dysfunction vexes Larry Barabino, Jr., the head of the New Orleans Recreation Development Commission.

Six pools were closed all summer while they were under construction or while the city sought contractors who could make repairs to broken HVAC systems or busted pool motors, which Barabino said are often targets of vandalism.

“Every time we try to go back and repair something they’re going back and stealing something else,” Barabino said. “It shuts us down from being able to open the pools in the summer months.”

Firefighters at Station 26 on Norman C. Francis Parkway said they saw as much as 30 gallons of water during storms because of a roof damaged by Ida.

Capt. Aaron Mischler, the fire union president, said firefighters cleaned up soggy scraps of ceiling tiles and lined station floors with garbage cans and kitchen pots to capture the water. A temporary tarp covered the station for so long that residents complained that disintegrating parts of it were littering the neighborhood.

That roof was fixed in August, three years after Ida.

To preserve the historic Algiers courthouse, home to the 2nd City Court, which mostly handles evictions and other small claims, Bonney's group for decades has taken up the city's maintenance responsibilities on its own.

The group recently raised thousands to pay contractors to install new courthouse gutters and trim the property's oak trees, Bonney said. Broken air conditioning recently briefly shut down courthouse operations, too, he said.

More than a year ago, Bonney informed the city that a storm had blown out two windows atop the courthouse's upriver tower, a problem that caused water to pour into the clerk of court's office during rainstorms.

The windows are still broken.

"In 1896, this building was constructed in just eight months," Bonney said. "Fixing these broken windows has taken nearly 15 months and counting."