

Graduation

Seniors from St. Louis Park High School and Hopkins High School reflect on their memories and futures.

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Hopkins great

Hopkins Royals athlete Gabriel Hirshman runs in the footsteps of the school's past greats.

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Thursday, June 2, 2022



(SUBMITTED PHOTOS BY JOHN BUNGERT)

Top left: A bulldozer works on repairs May 23 at Texas Avenue and Minnetonka Boulevard, two days after a massive water main break on the boulevard between Texas and Sumter avenues. **Center and right:** Residents affected by a water main break in St. Louis Park piled up debris from damage.

Water main break damage could cost millions of dollars

St. Louis Park council members vote 5-2 on initial emergency funding amid anger from distraught homeowners

By **SETH ROWE**
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A massive water main break affecting an estimated 55 houses in St. Louis Park has some residents in despair amid major cleanup bills.

Following an outcry from affected residents, the St. Louis Park City Council arranged an emergency meeting May 25 – four days after the water main rupture prompted water to flow through the city’s sanitary sewer system and into basements in the area. Water levels reached as high as 3 feet.

The break occurred on Minnetonka Boulevard between Texas and Sumter avenues and caused more than one million

gallons of water to be released, according to city reports.

Many residents reported that their insurance companies would not cover the damage, much of it extensive. City officials said a city insurance policy is limited to \$250,000 per incident, leading to limited funds left per household.

During the emergency meeting, the City Council voted 5-2 to provide \$300,000 in emergency assistance, with a total of up to \$30,000 available per home for cleanup. Councilmembers Sue Budd and Nadia Mohamed voted against the arrangement, arguing that they preferred that the city immediately provide cleanup funds available to more residents.

However, questions persisted during

the three-hour emergency meeting about whether recipients should have to waive liability claims against the city to receive the money and how much more money the city should provide. Questions about whether the city legally could provide funding grants for restoration instead of simply for cleanup also entered into the discussion.

City staff had proposed that the city provide reimbursement of up to \$30,000 per affected house for cleanup in a first phase followed by another \$30,000 in restoration loans. Households earning less than half the area median income would not have needed to pay interest on the loans while the city would have charged 2% interest for other recipients to offset

city costs, under the proposal. Residents would have had up to 10 years to pay back the loans.

The city staff proposal would have also provided loans of up to \$75,000 for each affected business, with 2% interest over a 20-years.

The city would have used federal American Rescue Plan Act funds for the reimbursement payments while using general levy funds from taxpayers for the loans for homeowners.

While the council only took action on the \$300,000 emergency reimbursement fund, members generally agreed the city

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Hopkins seeded No. 1 in section baseball

By JOHN SHERMAN

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Going into the Section 6AAA Baseball Tournament, which began with first-round games Friday, May 27, at least six of the eight teams had a shot at winning the title.

Hopkins (17-3) was seeded first and was playing No. 8 Minneapolis Washburn in the opening round. The game was in progress as this edition of the Sun Sailor went to press with an early holiday deadline. St. Louis Park (16-4) was seeded second and took on Minneapolis South in the opening round. Minneapolis Southwest (17-1) was third seeded and played No. 6 Armstrong. That left No. 4 Edina to play No. 5 Wayzata in the fourth contest.

The second round of games was held Saturday, May 28, and the action will continue this week with all games at Hopkins High's turf field.

Hopkins warmed up for section play with two wins in nonconference games last week. The Royals clipped

Rogers 7-1 and outlasted Spring Lake Park 12-8.

"We pitched by committee," Hopkins head coach Jason Mihalakis said. "We wanted to keep the arms fresh for the tournament games."

Jack Mausser, Hopkins' left fielder, provided the fireworks against Spring Lake Park with a home run, and in the win over Spring Lake Park, everyone in the Royals' lineup got involved.

Maddox "Mad Dog" Mihalakis, Hopkins' senior shortstop, is having a banner year, batting .470 with an on-base percentage well in excess of the .500 mark.

"One difference this year is that they're pitching Maddox more carefully," the star player's father and head coach said. "So he is walking more. Everyone knows about him because he has signed Division I [with the University of Arizona]."

Maddox is well protected in the Hopkins lineup with Charlie Schaefer and Mausser batting in front of him and Brock Zimmer and Drew Charney batting behind him along with Chase

Johnson, Paul Safranski and some other capable batters.

"Our lineup is pretty deep," coach Mihalakis said. "That's one reason we're 17-3."

Hopkins has developed a deep pitching staff as well with Gabe Olson and Marcus Champagne showing the way.

"It's true we're 17-3 going into the playoffs," coach Mihalakis said. "But like one of our assistant coaches said on social media, everyone is back to 0-0, and it's a new season. Wayzata started slowly, but has turned things around. You can never count them out. I don't consider Wayzata a sleeper because they have two front-line pitchers, a good catcher and the Berkland brothers at the top of the lineup. Edina, with coach Tom Nevers, has the program back to where it used to be. Southwest is having a good year and St. Louis Park is very good. Armstrong is another competitive team. You never know what's going to happen in a tournament like this."



(SUN PHOTO BY JOHN SHERMAN)

Jack Mausser of the Hopkins High baseball team, taking a big swing above, has hit seven home runs for the Lake Conference champions.

Damage

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needed to do more for affected residents. They suggested another emergency meeting could be possible.

Resident anger and sadness

Many speakers at the emergency meeting strongly rejected the staff proposal, with some saying their home damages could exceed \$100,000 or more. Some speakers angrily held up pictures of the damage. Tears flowed both in the audience and at the council dais, as Councilmember Sue Budd expressed her dismay at the hardship. One elderly resident reported having suicidal thoughts as a result of the disaster.

Julie North, a resident of Quebec Avenue, said insurance would not cover their costs. She disputed city communications that asserted the city had notified homeowners by going door-to-door, noting that she learned of the break from her neighbor and by asking a police officer on Minnetonka Boulevard.

Dimitrios Lalos, a resident of Rhode Island Avenue, said he and his family had put \$140,000 down to purchase their house one month ago.

"That's probably gone now," Lalos said. His wife first noticed the problem, thinking water might have been left on.

"I went downstairs to a horror movie – water gushing from our toilet," Lalos said, adding that the water reached as high as 16-inches deep.

Quebec Avenue resident Camille Gipple said she has a tight budget and no one to

help her, with her insurance company pulling fans out of the basement after determining that her policy would not cover the damage.

"I don't even know what to do," said Gipple, who said she could not afford to pay for cleanup and is worried about mold. "My neighbors are telling me it's not safe to be in the house."

A new furnace is ruined but will still cost her hundreds of dollars a month, while a freezer is also destroyed and silt covers her basement.

"There's a lot of emotional angst over this," Gipple said.

Adam Snyder, also a Quebec Avenue resident, said his costs would exceed \$60,000 and that he had planned to sell his house in three weeks.

"We have to go ahead with all this remediation and everything and just hope that you guys come through with the funds because we are we're in a real tough position," Snyder said.

Jennifer Snyder took issue with the council for waiting until May 25 to call an emergency meeting, after residents had notified the media.

"You saying your care and compassion is genuine was not even close to being exhibited this week," she said.

Jeff Withers, of Rhode Island Avenue, asked council members, "What grade would you give yourself?"

Jim Lefebvre, of Quebec Avenue, said the incident has destroyed his home.

"Your response is an insult to a longtime taxpayer in this community, and it should not stand – and we will see we will do everything in our power as a group to see that it doesn't," Lefebvre said.

Council response

In response to the residents, Budd began to say council members had to imagine how they would react if their own homes had been impacted but then choked up.

"I don't have any magic words to say," Budd said. "I understand how devastating this is, and it's tragic."

She expressed regret that she had not visited homes sooner than she did and said she wanted to be an advocate for affected residents.

"It's not good to hear that people think this is not a good offer and even insulting," Budd said of the staff proposal. "That is disturbing to me."

However, Councilmember Tim Brausen called the staff proposal "a really good starting point to try to get you some immediate relief," adding that the city would have to raise taxes citywide to provide more funds. He made a motion to adopt the staff proposal but the motion died for lack of a second, prompting applause from residents.

Mayor Jake Spano suggested the city provide up to \$50,000 per home for the cleanup phase of city assistance, a move that could cost the city as much as \$2.7 million, but not provide restoration loans.

"Just make it simple and easy," Spano said.

Councilmember Nadia Mohamed responded that she preferred two phases so that people could still use loans for restoration instead of the city only providing cleanup money.

Councilmember Larry Kraft suggested the city provide up to \$50,000 per house for cleanup and \$30,000 in loans per house. His proposal would have required resi-

dents to waive the city's liability, which he said would protect the city from additional costs.

However, numerous residents sought clarity on what would be considered cleanup and what would be considered restoration.

After more debate, Brausen proposed the city create an emergency grant program of \$150,000 to assist with immediate needs. After considerable discussion on how far that amount of funding would go, Brausen then amended his motion to include \$300,000 instead.

Budd objected because the amount could limit funding to only 10 homes if each received the maximum of \$30,000. She said she preferred to provide a higher funding amount for cleanup at the meeting.

Likewise, Mohamed said, "It seems like a first-come, first-served (situation) and whoever can get to it fastest."

Because the city will require recipients to sign a liability waiver to obtain the money, Brausen said he would be surprised if more than 10 homeowners sought to avail themselves of the emergency funds entirely.

"I think it's really going to be out there for emergency use – that the people that desperately need it have it," he said. "I'm not suggesting that this is an adequate remedy at all to this, either. I know we're going to be revisiting it, and we'll have much more information about it."

The city followed up on the May 25 emergency meeting with a neighborhood meeting May 26 at Lenox Community Center. The city has been posting updates about the issue at stlouispark.org under "Our City" and "City News."