

Sinking in Southwest Philly: How Eastwick can survive the battle with urban flooding

A neighborhood dealing with climate disaster hopes new grants bring relief.



Resident Leo Brundage stands in front of the flood-prone creek behind his house. MEGAN RUGGLES

Megan Ruggles

Jan. 01, 2022, 9:00 a.m.

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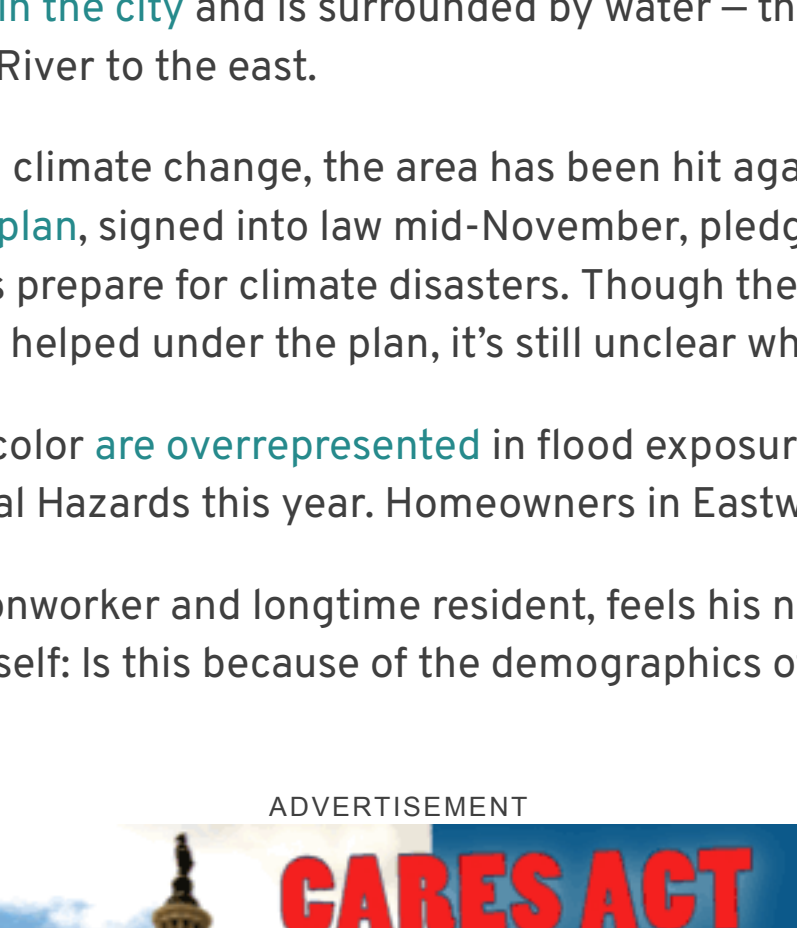
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Brenda Whitfield's Saturn Place home seemed like the ideal place to raise a family when she moved to the street that borders a low-lying field in the Eastwick neighborhood of Southwest Philadelphia over 40 years ago.

"We just knew we were buying land in a neighborhood that had top 10 schools," Whitfield said. Pregnant with her second child at the time, it was a top priority.

Two decades later, in 1999, the local middle school her children had attended endured 9 feet of flooding, resulting in damages over \$1 million. "People often ask why you move to a flood zone," Whitfield said, "but you move because the realtors don't mention it."

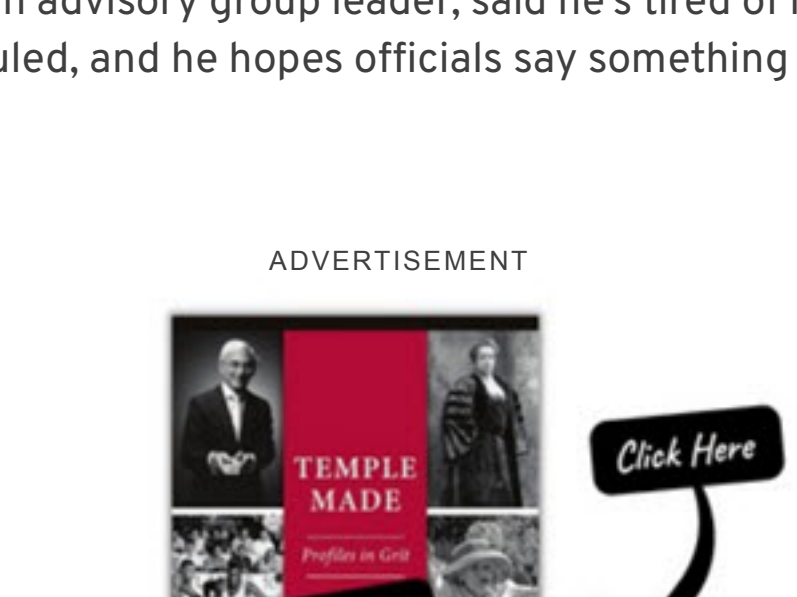


Eastwick, a predominantly Black neighborhood with an average household income of \$40,000, is one of many communities of color nationwide disproportionately affected by urban flooding. It rests on the lowest spot in the city and is surrounded by water – the Darby and Cobbs creeks to the west and Schuylkill River to the east.

As storms intensified amid climate change, the area has been hit again and again. President Joe Biden's infrastructure plan, signed into law mid-November, pledges billions in funding for FEMA to help communities prepare for climate disasters. Though there's a movement to make Eastwick one of the places helped under the plan, it's still unclear whether it will happen.

Across the U.S., people of color are overrepresented in flood exposure "hotspots," according to a study published in Natural Hazards this year. Homeowners in Eastwick have noticed.

Leo Brundage, a retired ironworker and longtime resident, feels his neighborhood has not been prioritized. "I'm asking myself: Is this because of the demographics of the community?"



Whitfield, now a grandmother, echoed Brundage's concern. There have always been "little floods," she said, but "no one wanted to listen to a middle-class area with Blacks moving in."

It wasn't until the 4-foot floodwaters caused by Hurricane Floyd in 1999 that the city started paying attention, she said. Since Floyd, the Army Corps of Engineers has been conducting flood mitigation studies, but residents are frustrated by the lack of real results.

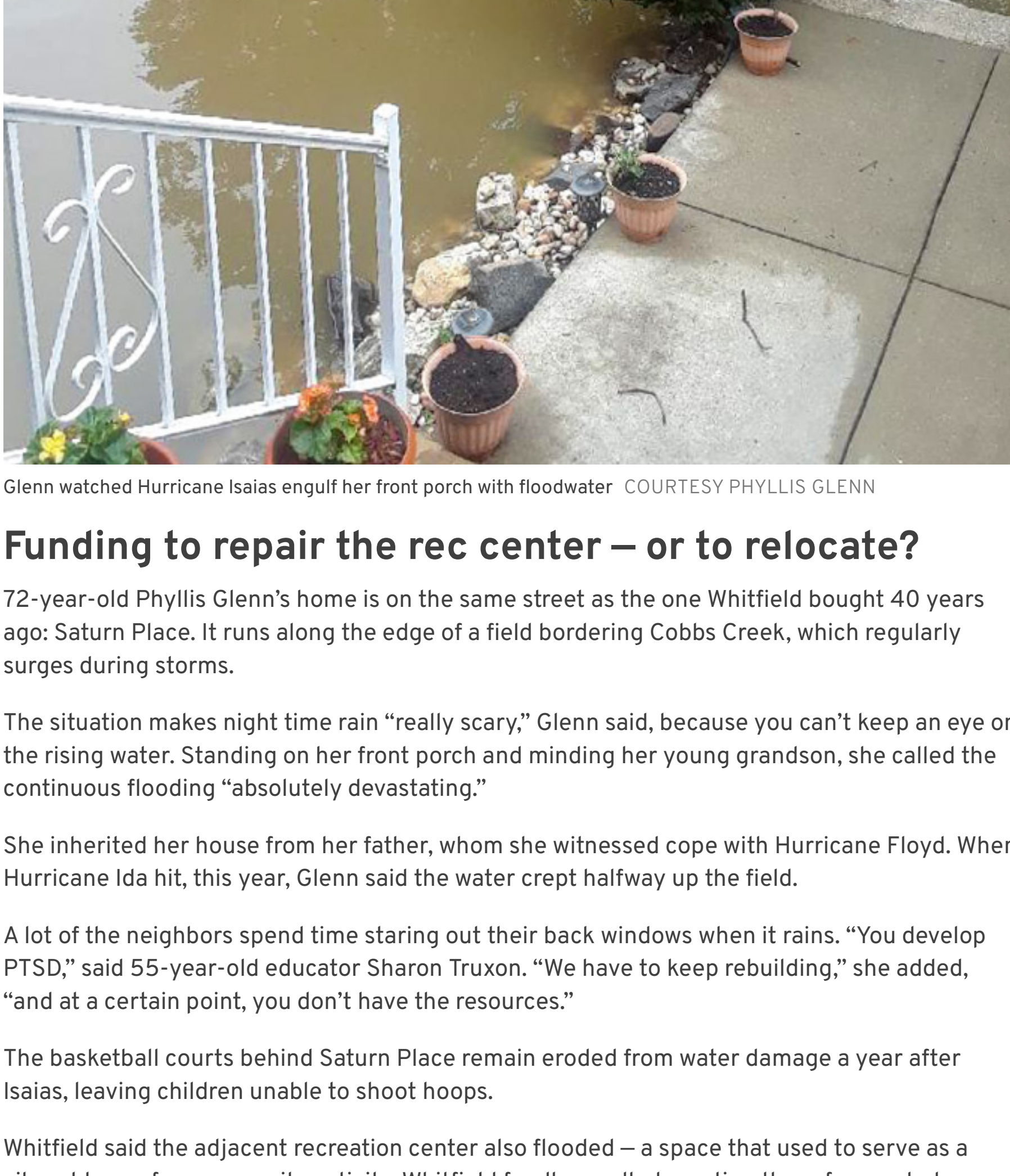
This October, the corps presented its study to the Eastwick community advisory group.

Brundage, who serves as an advisory group leader, said he's tired of hearing about new studies. Another meeting is scheduled, and he hopes officials say something concrete about "if they want to help us or not."



When Hurricane Isaias hit in 2020, Brundage said he dealt with over \$60,000 worth of damage.

"I'm 77 years old, and so I'm trying to live what little life I have left the best," he said. "Not having this post-traumatic stress because every time it rains, we get flooded."



Glenn watched Hurricane Isaias engulf her front porch with floodwater. COURTESY PHYLLIS GLENN

Funding to repair the rec center – or to relocate?

72-year-old Phyllis Glenn's home is on the same street as the one Whitfield bought 40 years ago: Saturn Place. It runs along the edge of a field bordering Cobbs Creek, which regularly surges during storms.

The situation makes night time rain "really scary," Glenn said, because you can't keep an eye on the rising water. Standing on her front porch and minding her young grandson, she called the continuous flooding "absolutely devastating."

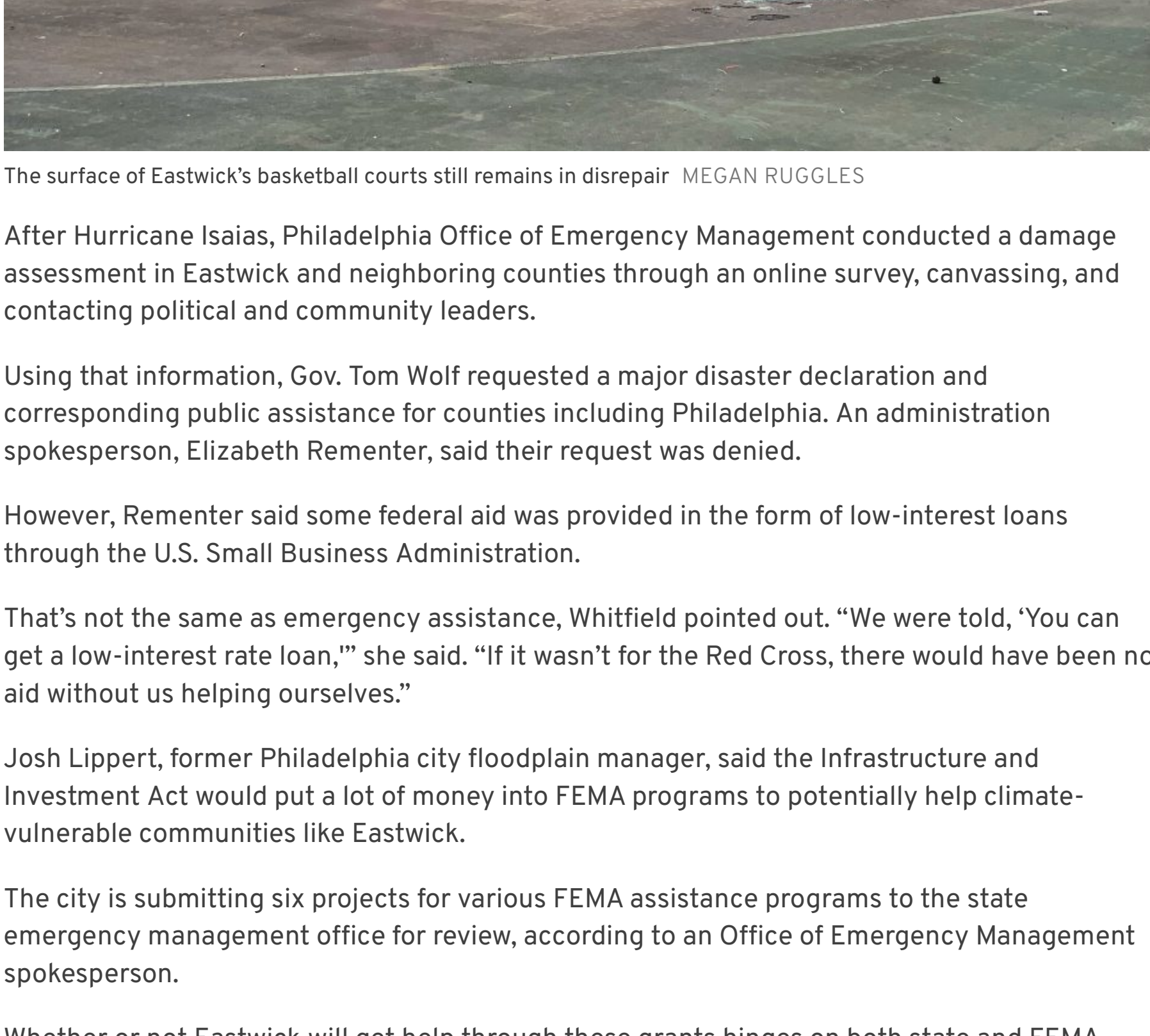
She inherited her house from her father, whom she witnessed cope with Hurricane Floyd. When Hurricane Ida hit, this year, Glenn said the water crept halfway up the field.

A lot of the neighbors spend time staring out their back windows when it rains. "You develop PTSD," said 55-year-old educator Sharon Truxon. "We have to keep rebuilding," she added, "and at a certain point, you don't have the resources."

The basketball courts behind Saturn Place remain eroded from water damage a year after Isaias, leaving children unable to shoot hoops.

Whitfield said the adjacent recreation center also flooded – a space that used to serve as a vibrant home for community activity. Whitfield fondly recalled meeting there for crochet classes, while others played pinnacle games.

The community received a grant to restore the center, neighbors said, but until recently work was delayed.



The surface of Eastwick's basketball courts still remains in disrepair. MEGAN RUGGLES

After Hurricane Isaias, Philadelphia Office of Emergency Management conducted a damage assessment in Eastwick and neighboring counties through an online survey, canvassing, and contacting political and community leaders.

Using that information, Gov. Tom Wolf requested a major disaster declaration and corresponding public assistance for counties including Philadelphia. An administration spokesperson, Elizabeth Rementer, said their request was denied.

However, Rementer said some federal aid was provided in the form of low-interest loans through the U.S. Small Business Administration.

That's not the same as emergency assistance, Whitfield pointed out. "We were told, 'You can get a low-interest rate loan,'" she said. "If it wasn't for the Red Cross, there would have been no aid without us helping ourselves."

Josh Lippert, former Philadelphia city floodplain manager, said the Infrastructure and Investment Act would put a lot of money into FEMA programs to potentially help climate-vulnerable communities like Eastwick.

The city is submitting six projects for various FEMA assistance programs to the state emergency management office for review, according to an Office of Emergency Management spokesperson.

Whether or not Eastwick will get help through these grants hinges on both state and FEMA approval, Whitman hopes it does. She also hopes for progress on the program to relocate residents out of the flood zone – but she'll be sad to go.

"When we moved to this neighborhood," Whitfield said, "it's like any neighborhood – you want to leave a legacy for generations to come."

Updated Jan. 4



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By Bibiana Correa · Today, 12:15 p.m.



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By Billy Penn Staff · Today, 8:00 a.m.



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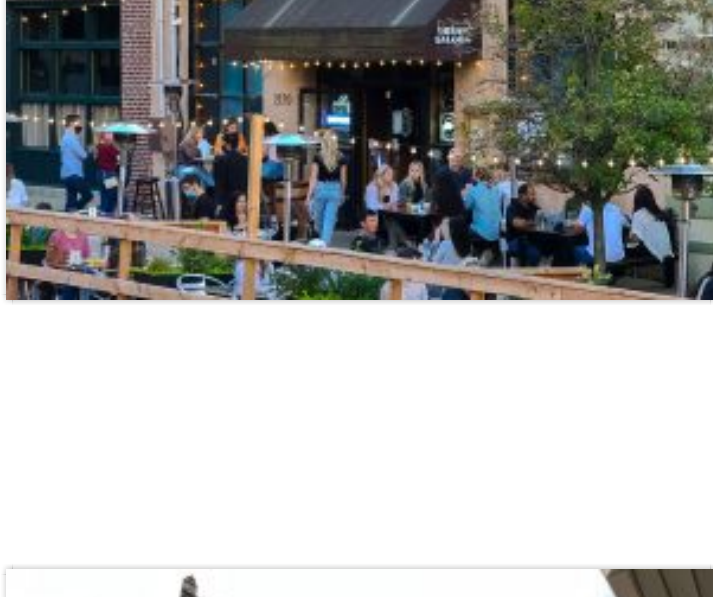


LATINO LIFE IN PHILLY

Lienzo coloridas destacan la cultura puertorriqueña en una nueva exposición de arte en West Kensington

Llamado "Tú Eres Puerto Rico," la exhibición se demostró tres años para realizarse

By Bibiana Correa · Yesterday



LATINO LIFE IN PHILLY

Colorful canvases highlight Puerto Rican culture at new art show in West Kensington

Called "Tu Eres Puerto Rico," the exhibit was three years in the making.

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It creates an instantly iconic selfie spot on Independence Mall.

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PHILLY FOOD AND DRINK SCENE

Philly is revising the surprise streetery rules that were a 'gut punch' for outdoor dining

The new regulations, which are said to take restaurants' feedback into account, could go into effect as soon as May 12.

By Lizzy McLellan Ravitch · Apr. 27



How to help your Philly neighbors get free smoke alarms installed

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By Jordan Levy · Apr. 27



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Why Philly pretzels are the best

By Billy Penn Staff · Apr. 27

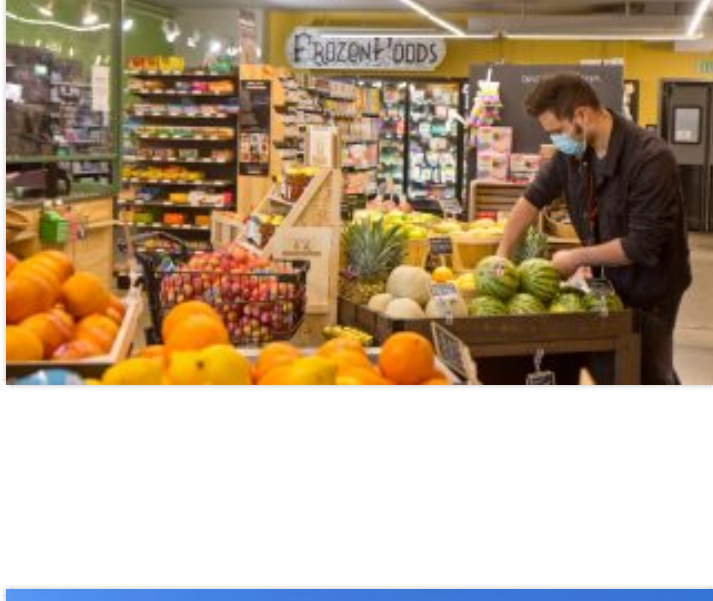


ELECTION 2022

If voters approve, Philly will boot gendered references like 'fireman' from the city's official governing documents

The move would stop assuming the mayor and school superintendent will always be a man.

By Asha Prihar · Apr. 27



MORNING ROUNDUP

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Jewish museum reopens with free admission

By Billy Penn Staff · Apr. 26



ELECTION 2022

Should the board that helps enforce Philly's fair housing laws be made permanent? It's a ballot question in the May primary

The FHC has been operating since 1962, but it's not yet written into the charter.

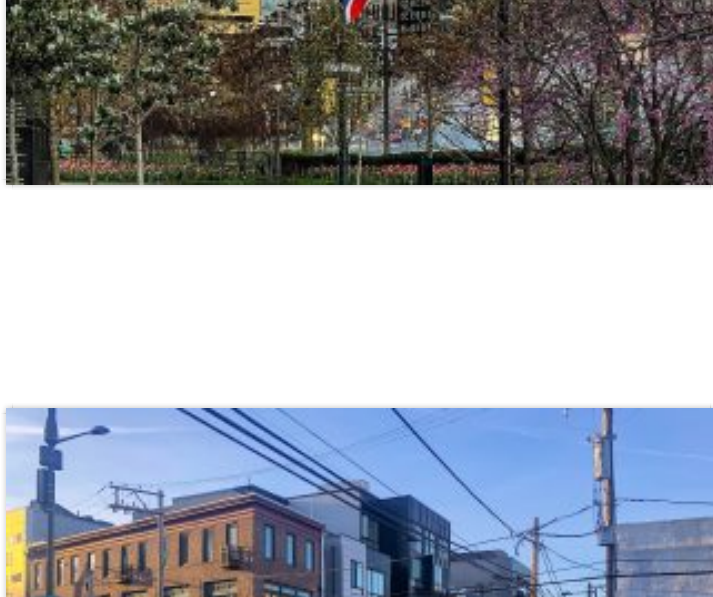
By Jordan Levy · Apr. 26



Why Philadelphia soft pretzels are better than the rest

The shape results in a unique texture and flavor.

By Danya Henninger · Apr. 26

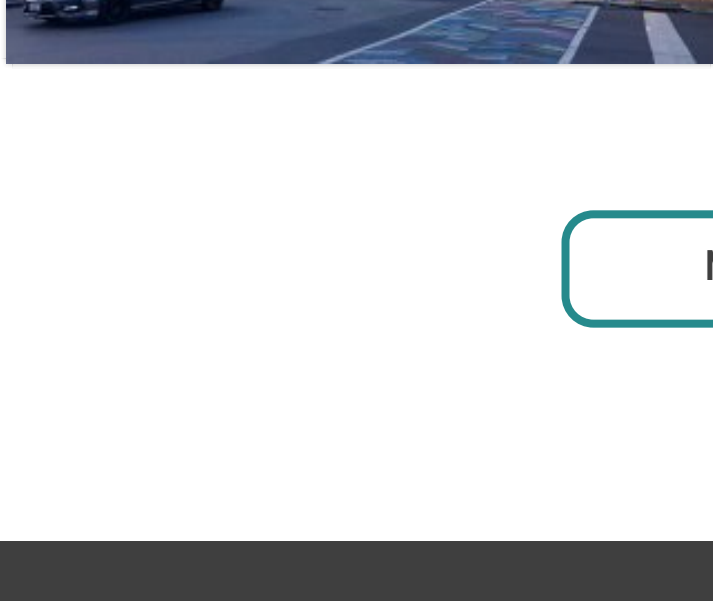


ELECTION 2022

A Democratic candidate for Senate claimed a Philly ward endorsement that didn't quite happen

U.S. Rep. Conor Lamb got the nod from a majority of divisions in the ward, but in this case, it's not the same thing.

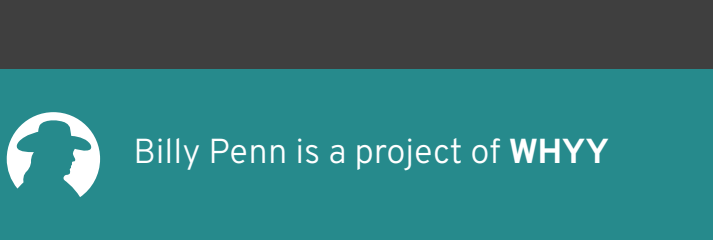
By Lizzy McLellan Ravitch · Apr. 25



Can a food co-op thrive in Kensington? KCFC says it has just 6 months to turn things around

Long in the works, the community grocery story is trying to maintain momentum in a changing neighborhood.

By Lizzy McLellan Ravitch · Apr. 25



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Archeological dig on the Delaware

By Billy Penn Staff · Apr. 25

ELECTION 2022

1 in 5 young Pa. voters can't participate in the big Senate or governor races because the commonwealth has closed primaries

There's a renewed push to change Pennsylvania's system.

By Asha Prihar · Apr. 25

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Waterfront trail along the Delaware

By Billy Penn Staff · Apr. 24

Retail boom in Northern Liberties: Over a dozen new storefronts are coming to the neighborhood

Here's a look at what's on tap, from restaurants to cafes, bike shops, and art centers.

By Asha Prihar · Apr. 24

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