

Drowning in Neglect

From Farmland to Floodland

Gibson Flats’ Battle Against City Water and County Inaction

WRITTEN BY
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Nestled on the southeastern outskirts of Great Falls, Montana, the rural community of Gibson Flats has become a symbol of bureaucratic inertia and environmental mismanagement. For decades, residents have battled chronic flooding caused by stormwater discharge from upstream urban development in Great Falls. What began as a natural drainage issue has escalated into a man-made disaster, compounded by failing infrastructure, legal battles, a devastating 2021 larceny fire, and contentious floodplain designations. Farmers report ruined fields, homeowners face failing septic systems, and the area - once a quiet agricultural haven - now grapples with restrictions that hinder recovery. This article delves into the history, key events, institutional failures, and calls for reform that define this protracted struggle.

Roots of the Flooding: Historical Context and Urban Expansion

Gibson Flats is a community that was platted in 1864 and lies in a low-lying area southeast of Great Falls, naturally positioned to collect stormwater discharge from the City’s higher elevations. As Great Falls expanded in the mid-20th century, subdivisions proliferated, channeling stormwater downhill through natural coulees and man-made systems. By the 1970s, the stormwater discharge from City of Great Falls caused Cascade County Commissioners to force the residents of Gibson Flats to install a series of ditch and culvert systems to divert excess water, aiming to alleviate the burden on Gibson Flats.

However, residents allege this infrastructure has been poorly maintained by both County and City officials for several decades, leaving the new board members of Gibson Flats Ditch Maintenance Account questioning, *“Why are the residents of Gibson Flats paying for the City’s and County’s stormwater discharge.”*

The problem intensified with continued development. Great Falls’ southeast corner, once rural, saw rapid residential growth, exacerbating stormwater discharge into Gibson Flats. According to the City of Great Falls ‘Christianson Outfall Improvements Drainage Study and Implementation Program of 1985’, the residential and commercial development began after the construction of 10th Avenue South by the Montana Department of Highways in 1952. Charles Russell Addition was platted and utilities installed during 1953 and 1954. Asphaltic roadways, concrete curb and a storm drain system were constructed in 1966. BGM Tracks (Park Place Health Care Center) was annexed in 1963. The North Section of Mountain View Terrace Addition was platted and annexed in 1964 and the South Section in 1965. City Chevrolet was built in 1967 and Rice Motors in 1977. Mountain View School was constructed in 1969 and the loop road constructed in 1973. Christianson Addition was annexed in 1978 and the First Supplement in 1983. A new storm drain system was installed in 1978 to serve the Christianson Addition and surrounding areas.

Farmers in the area have long complained that saturated soils render fields un-farmable, while excess water overwhelms septic systems, oversaturation of mixing zones, potential well contaminations, and environmental hazards.

Cascade County imposed an additional tax assessment on Gibson Flats property owners that funds the maintenance of a county and city-managed open ditch. The City of Great Falls pays three thousand dollars annually into the County managed ditch maintenance account. Locals claim Cascade County has neglected this stormwater discharge system for over 20 years, refusing to release the collected funds for community-led maintenance.

This neglect isn’t isolated; it’s part of a broader pattern in Montana’s central region, where rapid urbanization clashes with rural drainage capacities. Cascade County’s floodplain regulations, tied to federal standards from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), designate much of Gibson Flats as a 100-year floodplain—an area with a 1% annual chance of flooding. Residents argue this label



stems not from natural risks but from upstream mismanagement, turning a manageable issue into a compounding, negligent, and unethical engineering catastrophe.

Infrastructure Breakdown: Pipelines, Ditches, and Deferred Maintenance

At the heart of the crisis are three key pieces of infrastructure: the City and County’s 1970s-era ditch and culvert stormwater discharge system, the 2001 Russell Pond Discharge Piping System, and the failing existing Smith Coulee Ponds, per a City-contracted Morrison-Maierle Storm Drainage Study. The Russell Pond pipeline, intended as a relief valve, has reportedly been un-operational (*per City Public Works department*) since the breach of the Russell Pond pipeline of March 2019, which subsequently flooded Gibson Flats. The county tied in a stormwater discharge pipe from Best View Development connecting directly to the Russell Pond Pipeline without a check valve at the ‘T’ intersection of Gibson Flats Road and Eaton Avenue. This connection between the County and City discharge systems was agreed to for the purpose of Best View Subdivision. City officials have acknowledged historical flows into the area but refuse to upgrade and fix existing failing infrastructure.

The County’s Gibson Flats O&M ditch account, funded by a Special Assessment on the property owners of Gibson Flats, fares no better. Residents pay into the system expecting upkeep, yet Cascade County has allegedly failed to allow for the maintenance for over a decade. This has led to clogged channels and reduced capacity, worsening floods from the stormwater discharge. Gibson Flats community members have sought to take matters into their own hands, while continually requesting to regain access to the ditch maintenance account. However, County officials have repeatedly denied these appeals. County documents indicate the current balance of this Special Assessment, levied fund is \$126,920.

These failures highlight a jurisdictional divide. The City of Great Falls handles upstream (Russell Pond and Smith Coulee Ponds) stormwater, while Cascade County manages downstream County impacts. Coordination between the City of Great Falls and Cascade County has been spotty, with each entity pointing fingers at the other. A 2025 draft stormwater master plan for Great Falls



identifies over 120 projects to address city-wide issues, including historical drainage into Gibson Flats, but implementation remains uncertain.

Flooding Events: From Snowmelt to Legal Battles

Gibson Flats has suffered an increasing number of flooding events since the development of subdivisions and other City infrastructure that has continued to the north of the Gibson Flats area. On March 27th, 2019, a chinook wind event caused rapid snow melt. The City of Great Falls opened up the stormwater discharge pipe from the Russell Pond, flooding homes, fields, and roads of Gibson Flats due to a breach in the Russel Pond discharge pipe. Residents like Ron Erpelding evacuated livestock as waters rose rapidly in extreme cold temps, blaming City stormwater discharge drainage systems (*Great Falls Tribune March 28th 2019*). Homes were surrounded by water, and sections of roads closed.

Erpelding highlighted a damaged stormwater discharge pipe that directs water from a subdivision located uphill from his property into Sand Coulee Creek. He stated that the pipe was compromised during a vehicle accident in February 2019 per the Montana Highway Patrol Report. Although the pipe adjacent to Erpelding’s property is in the County, it connects to the City-owned and operated Russell Pond discharge pipe, without a check valve in place at its tie-in location.

As a result, Gibson Flats is receiving a substantial volume of stormwater discharge from multiple sources. This excessive influx is oversaturating the soil, leaving little to no capacity for absorbing naturally occurring drainage. Consequently, due to the excessive stormwater discharge, even moderate rainfall can lead to surface flooding due to the soil’s inability to retain more water.

Subsequently, litigation sparked up. In 2015, L. Johnson, Inc. filed a lawsuit claiming negligence, nuisance, trespass, and inverse condemnation by the City of Great Falls. L. Johnson, Inc. alleged that runoff from several subdivisions south of 10th

FEMA Flood Zone Definitions

- Zone VE (V1-30) – Areas of 100-year coastal flood with velocity**
 - Wave height 3 feet or greater
 - Wave runup depth 3 feet or greater
 - Within primary frontal dune (first dune landward of the beach)
- Zone AE (A1-30) – Areas of 100-year flood; flood elevations**
 - May be coastal or riverine
 - Coastal can contain up to 2.9 feet wave height
 - Coastal flood elevations at top of wave envelope
- Zone AO – “Overwash” areas with flow depths of 1 to 3 feet**
 - Generally coastal with sloping ground
 - Flow velocities can vary greatly
 - Flow paths are typically not well defined
- Zone A – Areas of 100-year flood; NO flood elevations given**
- Shaded Zone X (B) – Areas of 500-year flood**
- Unshaded Zone X (C) – “Areas of minimal flooding”**

Finding a flood zone

The Federal Emergency Management Agency develops Flood Insurance Rate Maps to show potential flood areas. These maps are used by home lending organizations and insurance companies to determine whether flood insurance may be mandatory for a homeowner. Areas that are within an A or V designation fall within a mandatory insurance zone. Some of the zones in our area:

Zone V
Areas along the coast that may see storm-induced waves higher than 3 feet along with flooding.

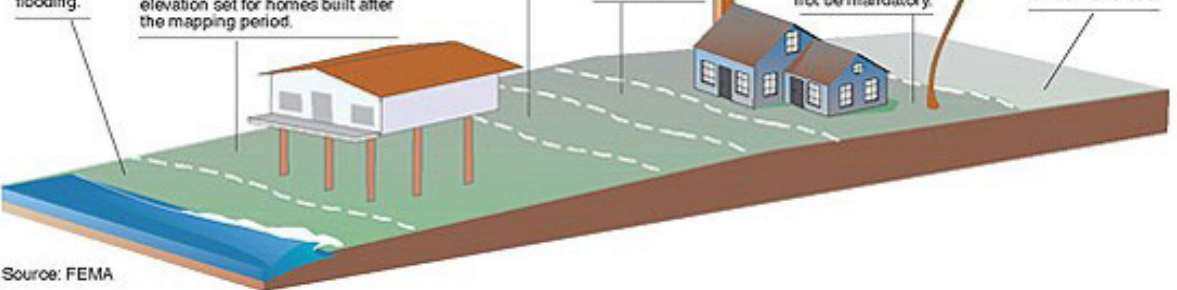
Zone AE, VE or Zone A followed by a number:
These are zones within the mandatory area where a more detailed engineering analysis has been done, a specific level of potential flooding has been determined, and a required base elevation set for homes built after the mapping period.

Zone AH
These are areas where flooding between 1 to 3 feet is likely to occur.

Zone AO
This is an overwash area, where water may rise 1 to 3 feet and move with some velocity, usually because terrain is sloped.

Shaded Zone X
Known as the 500-year flood plain, it represents a .2 percent chance of flood in a given year. Insurance would not be mandatory.

Unshaded Zone X
These areas are outside the 500-year flood plain and are considered the lowest-risk areas.



Source: FEMA

Until then, the community remains at the mercy of the next storm, a testament to the costs of neglect in America's Rural Heartland. 🏠