

## Pittsburgh residents turn to rain barrels as worsening deluge looms



*Photo: Heidi Murrin | Trib Total Media*

Emily Viehland with her rain barrel in her Highland Park yard on Wednesday, June 17, 2015.

By [Matthew Santoni](#)

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It's hard to say whether hundreds of rain barrels in the neighborhoods surrounding Negley Run, Washington Boulevard and Heth's Run have reduced flooding, but this month's spring storms are giving them quite a workout.

State College-based Accuweather reports the gauge at Pittsburgh International Airport tallied 4.26 inches of rainfall this month through Wednesday morning, which is close to the average total for all of June, meteorologist John Gresiak said. More rain is forecast Thursday, and by Saturday the region could receive the remnants of Tropical Storm Bill.

"Unfortunately, (the rain) has kind of a compounding effect. Once you've had that first heavy rain, like we had over the last couple of days, anything else that hits will run off rather than soak in," Gresiak said.

More storms could drop an additional 0.5 to 2 inches of rain on Pittsburgh on Thursday and Friday. Depending on how the remnants of Bill move as it heads up the Ohio River Valley, the region could get even more drenched this weekend, he said.

"It filled my rain barrel in half a day, and my husband's cellphone was making horrible noises with 'flood warning,' 'flood warning,'" said Emily Viehland, 40, of Highland Park, who got her barrel in response to stormwater backing up in her sewers and flooding her basement. "The rain barrel gives me peace of mind, because even if we had another sewer clog, we wouldn't have the same problem because the water goes to the barrel."

Viehland's is among 400 homes in Morningside, Highland Park, Lincoln-Lemington, Larimer and East Liberty that got rain barrels — some subsidized with grant money — through Project 15206 in an effort to reduce stormwater runoff and sewer overflows into the rivers and flash flooding.

A partnership of the Penn State Center Outreach Office in Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh Community Services Inc. and the former office of state Sen. Jim Ferlo, Project 15206 was formed in 2013, in part, to help Alcosan comply with an Environmental Protection Agency mandate to reduce stormwater entering the sewer system. It's also intended to focus on the East End in response to flooding along Washington Boulevard in 2011 that drowned Kimberly Griffith, 45, of Plum; her two daughters, Brenna, 12, and Mikaela, 8; and Mary Saflin, 72, of Oakmont. The city and PennDOT installed flood gates to automatically block traffic at each end of that section of road when the road is inundated.

The partnership distributed rain barrels and designed the bio-retention garden installed in November at the bottom of Negley Run Boulevard to reduce the amount of water flowing down that street onto Washington Boulevard.

They are still working on projects to install a “bioswale” to slow water running down Negley Run toward Washington, roadside rain gardens in Larimer to capture more water at the top of the hills and a project at the Port Authority's East Liberty Garage to reduce runoff from their parking and maintenance building, said Lisa Kunst Vavro, sustainable environments manager with the Penn State Center Outreach Office.

The project included installing rain gauges and flow meters on storm drain inlets along Negley Run Boulevard, but the group hasn't analyzed the data it's collected to be able to say what effect its efforts have had so far, Vavro said.

“Once we can compare before and after, we hope we can say we were right,” she said.

“Unfortunately, there are a lot of problems along Washington Boulevard that can't be addressed with green infrastructure. There's old infrastructure there, and the road is in a depression, so it's just holding a lot of water in events like 2011.”

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