

Chicago flood might be just the first disaster

Three days after the "Big Flood" started in Chicago on April 13, when the Chicago River surged through a retaining wall and flooded the downtown "Loop," Mayor Richard Daley nailed his fall guy. With much shouting and ceremony, Daley fired his acting Transportation Director John LaPlante. In turn, LaPlante said that hindsight will allow you to do everything right.

What hindsight would show is that the once-great Windy City has been falling apart, and maintenance and improvements that should have been routine have been bypassed because of the budget crisis. Who knows what disaster will befall Chicago next?

In the early hours of April 13, the Chicago River broke into a 50-mile unused tunnel system, originally opened during 1904-06 to haul freight and coal into Loop buildings, and take ashes and debris out. The tunnels were abandoned during the 1950s.

Soon water rose into the basements and lower floors of downtown buildings at a rate of two feet per hour. Thousands of stores and offices, including the Chicago Board of Trade and the Mercantile Exchange, were closed. Hundreds of buildings were evacuated, including 15,000 people from the Sears Tower (the world's tallest building), Marshall Field's flagship State Street store, and the huge Merchandise Mart—the world's largest wholesale buying complex with 93 acres of floorspace. It could take more than a week to resume activities in a two-square mile area of downtown Chicago.

The immediate background to the disaster began in January, when cable television crews, crawling through the old tunnel system to inspect their fiber-optic cable lines, observed a leak in the river retaining wall adjoining the tunnel. A videotape was made. The problem was brought before the City Transportation Department. Bids were solicited from contractors to repair the hole. All bids came in over

the department budget line for this maintenance cost—reportedly \$10,000. So a request for bids was put out again. Then reality roared in with a vengeance.

Similar disasters, not quite so dramatic, have struck over the past 12 months in New York City and Washington, where 100-year-old water mains burst in downtown areas. The "April showers" in Chicago again remind the nation that emergency economic infrastructure must be built—or else.

On the first day of the Chicago flood, engineers dropped rocks, mattresses, and other debris into the river trying to plug the hole. Nicholas Melas, president of the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District, declared a health emergency in case the brackish water standing in basements posed dangers of contamination. "God knows what's down there," he said.

The water stood as deep as 30 feet in some buildings, and firemen manning portable pumps capable of moving 500 gallons of water a minute were unable to keep pace with the incoming water. Mayor Daley took part by hand wringing. "We are trying to figure out anything possible to stop the flow of water into the system," Daley said.

Finally, the strategy devised—still awaiting successful implementation as of this writing—was to try to link the "Deep Tunnel" flood control system, built during the last 20 years to handle storm runoff, with the old freight tunnels, to drain the flood waters away. Initially, an estimated 250 million gallons of water had flooded the freight tunnels. Since the Deep Tunnel can hold 1 billion gallons, the problem came down to how to drill a hole to connect the two systems. The freight tunnels are 35 feet below ground and Deep Tunnel parallels them 215 feet deeper. Meantime, the Army Corps of Engineers was able to lower the Chicago River by two inches to reduce flow.

The flooding also required turning off the electricity to the affected region—about an 18-square block area. And because of water seepage, the Chicago Transit Authority shut down its Loop subway stations, rerouting some trains, including service to O'Hare International Airport.—*Marcia Merry*

to reach a verdict. "Let me assure you, you are not going home today." According to an April 8 Associated Press wire, after the harangue, "Hoeveler went to the jury room to make sure jurors understood his explanation."

The outcome showed the absurdity of Hoeveler's instructions to the jury that "politics and policy should play no part in your deliberations." Juror Jean Hallisey said that there was almost a mistrial for lack of unanimity, because one or two of the jurors insisted on Noriega's innocence. "They wanted to get up and walk out," said Hallisey, according to the April

11 *Washington Post*. Hallisey explained how the jurors in favor of acquittal were arm-twisted into going along with the majority. "I said, 'The whole world is waiting for this verdict. President Bush is waiting for this verdict. How can you say you want to go home?'" That statement alone about Bush should have been sufficient to throw the entire trial out the window as the farce everyone knows it is, since jurors must take an oath only to consider evidence presented in court—and that does not include the deranged obsessions of George Bush.