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# Gap Creek:

“From Neglect to Action: Confronting the Environmental Injustice in the Sylvania Heights/Lovejoy Neighborhood”

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# Gap Creek 2026



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gap Creek, a modest but consequential waterway flowing through Fort Walton Beach and unincorporated Okaloosa County, has shaped the lives of Sylvania Heights and Lovejoy area residents for generations. What was once a natural drainage feature has become a chronic source of flooding, property damage, environmental degradation, and public health concern. For more than twenty years, the Okaloosa County Branch of the NAACP has documented these impacts, advocated for solutions, and elevated the voices of residents whose experiences have too often been overlooked.



This report provides a comprehensive, data-driven, and community-centered analysis of the environmental, infrastructural, and social challenges surrounding Gap Creek. Drawing on historical records, environmental assessments, government documents, and community testimony, it traces the evolution of Sylvania Heights from a rural settlement to a predominantly Black neighborhood shaped by decades of underinvestment and environmental neglect.

The findings are clear:

- **Chronic flooding** has persisted for more than four decades, repeatedly damaging homes, isolating residents, and undermining neighborhood stability.
- **Aging and inadequate stormwater infrastructure**, including missing drainage systems, undersized culverts, and delayed maintenance—has left the community vulnerable to even moderate rainfall.
- **Water quality impairments**, including elevated levels of E. coli and fecal coliform, pose ongoing risks to public health and ecological integrity.
- **Erosion and sedimentation** have destabilized creek banks, reduced channel capacity, and contributed to infrastructure failures such as the 2025 Beal Parkway pipe collapse.
- **Environmental justice concerns** are deeply rooted, as Sylvania Heights and Lovejoy’s predominantly Black and low-income residents have borne disproportionate impacts from flooding, pollution, and delayed governmental action.
- **Governmental responses**, while improving in recent years, have historically been fragmented, slow, and constrained by jurisdictional boundaries between the City of Fort Walton Beach and Okaloosa County.
- **Community resilience and advocacy** have been the driving force behind progress, from Brownfield designations to renewed attention from local, state, and federal partners.





The report concludes with a set of recommendations grounded in best practices for watershed restoration, nature-based solutions, infrastructure modernization, and community-driven planning. These recommendations emphasize the need for coordinated intergovernmental action, sustained investment, transparent communication, and a commitment to environmental justice.

Gap Creek is not simply a stormwater challenge—it is a test of whether local institutions will meaningfully address long-standing inequities and invest in the health, safety, and dignity of Sylvania Heights and Lovejoy area residents. This report provides the foundation for that work.

## 1. Introduction & Purpose

Gap Creek is more than a waterway — it is a defining feature of the Sylvania Heights/Lovejoy community and a mirror reflecting decades of uneven development, environmental neglect, and civic resilience. For generations, residents have lived with chronic flooding, deteriorating infrastructure, and persistent environmental health concerns. These challenges have shaped daily life, limited economic opportunity, and contributed to a sense of isolation from the broader region’s growth and investment.

The purpose of this report is to provide a comprehensive, evidence-based, and community-centered assessment of the environmental, infrastructural, and social conditions surrounding Gap Creek and the Sylvania Heights/Lovejoy neighborhood. It synthesizes historical records, hydrologic data, engineering assessments, government documents, and lived experiences to present a clear and actionable understanding of the issues at hand.

This report aims to:

- **Document the historical development patterns** that created today’s vulnerabilities.
- **Analyze environmental and hydrologic conditions** that contribute to flooding, erosion, and water quality impairments.
- **Assess infrastructure deficiencies** and their impacts on homes, mobility, and public safety.
- **Highlight environmental justice concerns**, particularly the disproportionate burden placed on a predominantly Black and low-income community.
- **Evaluate governmental responses**, including successes, gaps, and opportunities for improved coordination.
- **Present comparative models** that demonstrate what effective, community-centered stormwater solutions can look like.
- **Offer recommendations** grounded in best practices, community priorities, and long-term resilience.



Ultimately, this report serves as both a technical resource and a moral call to action. It is designed to support policymakers, agency partners, funders, and community advocates in advancing equitable, sustainable, and timely solutions for Sylvania Heights and the broader Gap Creek watershed.

## 2. Historical Development Patterns

### Early Settlement and Rural Character

Before the rapid post-war expansion of Fort Walton Beach, the Sylvania Heights area was a rural enclave defined by wooded landscapes, small farms, and a close-knit community. Oral histories from residents like Ruth Lovejoy describe a quiet, spacious environment where families lived on large lots and relied on wells, septic systems, and unpaved roads. The area was widely regarded as “the country,” physically and socially distinct from the growing city center.

### Post-War Growth and Urbanization

The 1950s and 1960s brought dramatic change. The expansion of Eglin Air Force Base, coupled with the region’s emerging tourism economy, fueled a population boom. Fort Walton Beach grew nearly fivefold between 1950 and 1960, and development pushed outward into previously rural areas.

Subdivision activity accelerated:

- **1953:** Sylvan Marlar platted the first 116-lot subdivision in what would become Sylvania Heights.
- **1954–1955:** Additional subdivisions, including John Bishop and Pineview, expanded residential development.
- **1960s:** Construction continued, often without paved roads, stormwater systems, or municipal utilities.

These subdivisions were built **outside city limits**, meaning they did not benefit from the infrastructure investments available to incorporated neighborhoods. This early lack of drainage, sewer, and road systems created vulnerabilities that persist today.

### Demographic Shifts and Community Identity

By the 1960s, the Sylvania Heights/Lovejoy area had become a predominantly African American neighborhood. Many families relocated from downtown Fort Walton Beach, often moving



former military barracks onto residential lots as affordable housing. W.E. Combs High School served as a cultural anchor and the only high school for Black students until desegregation.

Despite strong community bonds and a tradition of civic engagement, Sylvania Heights remained economically marginalized. Median household incomes lagged behind surrounding areas, and infrastructure investment did not keep pace with need. These disparities laid the foundation for the environmental justice concerns that define the community's experience today.

## 3. Environmental & Hydrologic Conditions

### 3.1 Physical Characteristics of the Watershed

Gap Creek originates near the eastern boundary of Hurlburt Field and flows eastward through a patchwork of residential, commercial, and industrial land uses before discharging into Cinco Bayou. The watershed is characterized by **flat topography**, **low-lying basins**, and **highly altered drainage patterns** resulting from decades of incremental development.

Urbanization has replaced natural vegetation with impervious surfaces—roads, rooftops, parking lots—that accelerate runoff and reduce infiltration. As a result, rainfall that once soaked into the ground now moves rapidly into the creek, overwhelming its capacity and contributing to frequent flooding in the Sylvania Heights/Lovejoy area.

The creek's narrow, incised channel reflects years of unmanaged stormwater flows. In many areas, the creek has lost connection to its natural floodplain, increasing the velocity of water during storms and intensifying erosion.

### 3.2 Hydrologic Stressors

The hydrology of Gap Creek is shaped by a combination of natural constraints and human-made pressures:

- **Stormwater convergence:** Runoff from the industrial park south of Sylvania Heights flows northward, while runoff from residential areas to the north flows southward. These flows meet in the neighborhood, creating a hydrologic choke point.
- **Insufficient drainage infrastructure:** The absence of curbs, gutters, and storm drains in Sylvania Heights and the Lovejoy area limits the community's ability to convey water away from homes and streets.



- **Altered flow paths:** Historical development filled wetlands, straightened channels, and rerouted drainage, reducing the watershed's natural ability to store and slow water.
- **Increased runoff volumes:** As development intensified, stormwater loads increased without corresponding upgrades to drainage systems.

These stressors create a system where even moderate rainfall can overwhelm the creek and surrounding streets.

### 3.3 Erosion, Sedimentation, and Channel Degradation

Gap Creek exhibits clear signs of **channel instability**, including:

- Undercut banks and exposed tree roots
- Narrow, deep channel sections
- Failed revetments
- Exposed pipe crossings
- Sediment deposition that reduces channel capacity

The creek is caught in a cycle of **erosion and aggradation**. High-velocity flows erode banks and transport sediment downstream, where it settles in slower sections, burying culverts and reducing bridge clearance. This dynamic instability complicates restoration efforts and increases the risk of infrastructure failures.

### 3.4 Water Quality Impairments

Water quality assessments show that Gap Creek is impaired for **E. coli** and **fecal coliform**, with levels exceeding state thresholds. While nutrient levels (nitrogen, phosphorus, chlorophyll-a) remain within acceptable ranges, bacterial contamination poses significant risks.

Likely sources include:

- Failing or aging septic systems
- Illicit discharges
- Stormwater runoff carrying animal waste
- Industrial and commercial pollutants such as grease, oil, and metals

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) has designated Gap Creek (WBID 1899) as an **impaired waterbody**, triggering the requirement for a **Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL)** to reduce bacterial contamination.



## 3.5 Public Health Implications

Floodwater in the Sylvania Heights/Lovejoy neighborhood often contain elevated bacterial loads and pollutants. Residents report concerns about:

- Skin rashes
- Respiratory issues
- Mold exposure
- Clusters of cancer and kidney disease

While no formal epidemiological study has been conducted, the community's health concerns are consistent with long-term exposure to contaminated floodwaters, aging septic systems, and legacy industrial activity.

The environmental conditions in Sylvania Heights underscore the need for comprehensive health assessments and proactive public health interventions.

# 4. Flooding & Infrastructure Vulnerabilities

## 4.1 A History of Chronic Flooding

Flooding in the Sylvania Heights/Lovejoy area is not an isolated or recent phenomenon — it is a defining feature of daily life for many residents. Community members and NAACP leaders recount more than **four decades** of recurring inundation, with some families unable to leave their homes during even moderate rainstorms. These experiences are not anecdotal; they are supported by a long trail of engineering studies, county assessments, and resident documentation dating back to the late 1970s.

Despite repeated analyses, the core issues have remained unresolved. Each heavy rainfall reinforces the same pattern: water accumulates rapidly, overwhelms the limited drainage infrastructure, and spreads across streets, yards, and beneath homes. The persistence of these conditions has eroded community confidence and contributed to a sense of abandonment.



## **4.2 Notable Flood Events and Infrastructure**

### **Failures**

While chronic flooding is the norm, several major incidents have underscored the severity of the problem:

#### **The 2025 Beal Parkway Pipe Collapse**

In August 2025, a drainage pipe beneath State Road 189 (Beal Parkway) failed catastrophically near the Gap Creek bridge. The collapse created a large void in the roadway, forcing the closure of northbound lanes and diverting emergency resources. The Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) worked continuously to replace the pipe and stabilize the roadway, but the incident highlighted the vulnerability of aging infrastructure to water-related stress.

The collapse also revealed the complexity of jurisdictional responsibility. County officials emphasized that the failed pipe was part of the state road system, not county infrastructure — a reminder that multiple agencies share responsibility for the watershed, often with limited coordination.

#### **Localized Failures and Daily Disruptions**

Beyond headline-making events, residents face frequent disruptions:

- Streets become impassable during routine storms
- Water pools beneath homes, damaging foundations
- Mold proliferates in structures repeatedly exposed to moisture
- Vehicles are stranded or damaged
- Emergency access becomes limited

These impacts accumulate over time, creating long-term structural damage and financial strain for homeowners.

## **4.3 Structural Vulnerabilities in Homes**

Many homes in Sylvania Heights were built in the 1950s and 1960s, often using relocated military barracks or modest cinder-block construction. These structures were not designed to withstand repeated flooding or prolonged exposure to moisture.



Residents report:

- Cracked floors
- Misaligned doors and cabinets
- Shifting foundations
- Persistent mold growth
- Warped walls and flooring

These conditions not only reduce property values but also pose health risks, particularly for children, seniors, and individuals with respiratory conditions.

## 4.4 Stormwater Infrastructure Deficiencies

The root of many flooding issues lies in the **absence of comprehensive stormwater infrastructure** in Sylvania Heights. Unlike the adjacent W.E. Combs neighborhood — annexed into the City of Fort Walton Beach in 1977 — most of the Lovejoy area remains in unincorporated Okaloosa County and lacks:

- Curbs
- Gutters
- Storm drains
- Adequate retention capacity
- Modern conveyance systems

The only significant detention facility is a 1.5-acre pond between Poplar Road and Hickory Road, which is insufficient to manage the volume of stormwater flowing into the neighborhood.

Runoff from surrounding developments — including industrial, commercial, and residential areas — funnels directly through Sylvania Heights, overwhelming its limited capacity to absorb or convey water.

## 4.5 Delays, Obstacles, and Unfulfilled Promises

Efforts to improve stormwater infrastructure have been repeatedly delayed by:

- **Permitting challenges**, especially when proposed sites include wetlands
- **Funding constraints**, with projects competing for limited local and federal dollars
- **Jurisdictional fragmentation**, as responsibilities are split between city, county, and state agencies
- **Regulatory hurdles**, including Army Corps of Engineers approvals



One example is the long-planned stormwater retention facility at the north end of Poplar Avenue. Although the county acquired land for this purpose between 1997 and 2004, the site remains undeveloped due to wetland permitting requirements. Signs marking the “proposed stormwater retention area” have stood for nearly two decades, symbolizing the community’s frustration with slow progress.

## **5. Public Health & Environmental Justice**

### **5.1 Disproportionate Burdens on a Historically Marginalized Community**

Sylvania Heights is a predominantly Black, historically under-resourced neighborhood that has endured decades of environmental neglect. The cumulative impacts of inadequate drainage, chronic flooding, aging infrastructure, and water quality impairments have placed a disproportionate burden on residents — a burden not shared equally across Okaloosa County.

Environmental justice is not an abstract concept here; it is the lived reality of families who have watched their homes deteriorate, their health decline, and their concerns go unanswered. The pattern is unmistakable: a community with fewer resources, less political influence, and a long history of exclusion has been left to shoulder risks that would be unacceptable elsewhere.

### **5.2 Public Health Concerns and Community Testimony**

Residents consistently report health issues that they believe are linked to environmental conditions, including:

- Respiratory illnesses
- Chronic mold exposure
- Skin rashes
- Kidney disease
- Clusters of cancer diagnoses

While no formal epidemiological study has been conducted, the concerns are credible and consistent with exposure to:

- Contaminated floodwaters
- High levels of E. coli and fecal coliform
- Mold proliferation in repeatedly flooded homes
- Legacy industrial pollutants



- Aging septic systems and historical well water use

The absence of comprehensive health assessments leaves residents without answers and reinforces a sense of institutional neglect.

### **5.3 Housing Vulnerability and Economic Impacts**

Flooding has caused extensive structural damage to homes, many of which were built decades ago using modest materials or relocated military barracks. Repeated inundation has led to:

- Cracked foundations
- Warped floors and walls
- Persistent mold growth
- Misaligned doors and cabinetry
- Structural shifting and settling

These conditions reduce property values, limit opportunities for generational wealth, and deter new investment. Developers face higher costs due to required elevation and on-site retention, further constraining affordable housing options.

For many families, the home is both their greatest asset and their greatest vulnerability.

### **5.4 Psychological and Social Impacts**

Environmental injustice is not only physical — it is emotional. Residents describe:

- Anxiety during rain events
- Fear of property loss
- Frustration with slow governmental response
- A sense of being forgotten or dismissed
- Stress related to health uncertainties

These experiences erode trust in public institutions and deepen social inequities.

### **5.5 The NAACP's Role in Advancing Environmental Justice**

For more than two decades, the Okaloosa County Branch of the NAACP has been a consistent advocate for the Sylvania Heights/Lovejoy area. The Branch has:

- Documented flooding and infrastructure failures



- Organized community meetings and listening sessions
- Engaged local, state, and federal officials
- Partnered with environmental and civic organizations
- Elevated resident voices in public forums
- Pushed for equitable investment and accountability

This report continues that work by providing a comprehensive, evidence-based foundation for policy change and community-driven solutions.

## 6. Governmental & Intergovernmental Response

### 6.1 Okaloosa County Initiatives

Okaloosa County has long acknowledged the persistent flooding and environmental challenges in Sylvania Heights, though the pace and scale of intervention have not always matched the urgency of community needs. The county's **Local Mitigation Strategy (LMS)** identifies flooding and hurricanes as priority hazards and outlines a framework for disaster preparedness and long-term mitigation.

One of the most significant recent efforts is the development of a **stormwater park** in Sylvania Heights. Designed primarily as a retention and treatment facility, the park will:

- Capture and store stormwater
- Filter runoff before it enters Gap Creek
- Provide recreational space during dry periods
- Serve as a visible symbol of investment in the community

This project represents a shift toward **nature-based solutions** and multifunctional infrastructure. It also reflects the county's recognition that traditional drainage systems alone cannot address the scale of flooding in the watershed.

However, the county's efforts have been constrained by:

- Limited stormwater funding
- Regulatory hurdles
- Competing priorities across a rapidly growing region



- The need for coordination with state and federal agencies

Despite these challenges, the stormwater park and the county’s renewed focus on watershed-scale planning mark important steps forward.

## 6.2 City of Fort Walton Beach Investments

The City of Fort Walton Beach has made more consistent progress in stormwater management, particularly in the **W.E. Combs neighborhood**, which was annexed into the city in 1977. Because Combs benefits from a dedicated municipal stormwater utility, the city has been able to:

- Expand a one-acre retention pond
- Construct a rain garden to improve infiltration
- Upgrade drainage systems
- Implement water quality improvement projects

These investments highlight the stark contrast between incorporated and unincorporated areas. While Combs has seen steady improvements, Sylvania Heights — just across the jurisdictional line — has not received comparable infrastructure upgrades.

## 6.3 Intergovernmental Coordination Challenges

The Gap Creek watershed spans multiple jurisdictions, including:

- Okaloosa County
- The City of Fort Walton Beach
- The Town of Cinco Bayou
- The State of Florida (FDOT and FDEP)

This fragmentation complicates planning, funding, and implementation. Responsibilities for drainage, roadways, water quality, and permitting are divided among agencies with different priorities, budgets, and regulatory constraints.

Residents often experience this fragmentation as **bureaucratic deflection**, where one agency points to another as the responsible party. This dynamic has contributed to delays, confusion, and a lack of accountability.



## 6.4 State and Federal Engagement

State and federal agencies have become increasingly involved in recent years, driven by community advocacy and the growing recognition of environmental justice concerns.

### The 2025 Gap Creek Watershed Study

In September 2025, the Okaloosa County Commission approved **\$250,000 in surtax reserves** to match a state appropriation for a comprehensive watershed study. The \$500,000 project, conducted in partnership with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP), will:

- Map the creek channel
- Document existing stormwater infrastructure
- Evaluate nature-based and traditional engineering solutions
- Identify restoration and resilience projects
- Prioritize improvements for disadvantaged communities

This study represents the most comprehensive assessment of Gap Creek in decades and will serve as a roadmap for future investment.

### Funding Mechanisms

Stormwater and resilience projects in the watershed rely on a mix of:

- Local budgets
- State appropriations
- Federal grants (e.g., Hazard Mitigation Grant Program)
- Water Quality Improvement Program funds
- Brownfield redevelopment incentives

While these programs offer opportunities, they also require extensive documentation, competitive applications, and long timelines — challenges that often disadvantage communities like Sylvania Heights.

## 6.5 Community-Driven Engagement and Advocacy

Governmental action has accelerated in recent years largely because of **community advocacy**. Partnerships between the NAACP Environmental and Climate Justice Committee, the Okaloosa Democratic Executive Committee, and local residents have:



- Organized watershed tours
- Engaged elected officials
- Elevated environmental justice concerns
- Increased media attention
- Built momentum for state and federal involvement

These efforts demonstrate the power of community-led organizing in shaping public policy and securing long-overdue investment.

## 7. Funding Landscape

### 7.1 Overview of Available Funding Streams

Addressing the complex challenges in the Gap Creek watershed requires sustained, multi-source investment. No single agency or funding stream can resolve the flooding, water quality, and infrastructure issues alone. Instead, progress depends on a coordinated strategy that leverages:

- **Local government budgets**
- **State appropriations**
- **Federal grants**
- **Specialized environmental programs**
- **Brownfield redevelopment incentives**
- **Public-private partnerships**

Each funding source comes with its own requirements, timelines, and constraints, which can either accelerate or delay progress depending on how effectively they are navigated.

### 7.2 Local Funding Mechanisms

Okaloosa County and the City of Fort Walton Beach both maintain stormwater budgets, but their capacities differ significantly.

#### Okaloosa County

The county relies on:

- General fund allocations
- Local option surtax reserves
- Hazard mitigation match requirements



- Project-specific appropriations

Because Sylvania Heights is unincorporated, it does not benefit from a dedicated stormwater utility fee — a key reason why infrastructure upgrades have lagged behind those in incorporated areas.

### **City of Fort Walton Beach**

The city operates a **stormwater utility**, providing a stable revenue stream for:

- Pond expansions
- Drainage upgrades
- Water quality improvements
- Maintenance of existing systems

This structural difference explains why the W.E. Combs neighborhood has seen more consistent investment than Sylvania Heights.

## **7.3 State Funding Opportunities**

The State of Florida provides several programs relevant to Gap Creek, including:

- **Water Quality Improvement Grants**
- **Resilient Florida Program funds**
- **State appropriations for watershed studies**
- **Brownfield redevelopment incentives**
- **Stormwater and wastewater infrastructure grants**

The 2025 state appropriation that helped fund the Gap Creek watershed study is a prime example of how state support can catalyze local action.

## **7.4 Federal Funding Opportunities**

Federal programs play a critical role in large-scale resilience and infrastructure projects. Key sources include:

- **FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP)**
- **FEMA Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC)**



- **EPA water quality grants**
- **HUD Community Development Block Grants (CDBG)**
- **USDA Rural Development programs**

These programs can support:

- Stormwater retention facilities
- Channel restoration
- Infrastructure upgrades
- Nature-based solutions
- Community resilience planning

However, federal grants require extensive documentation, competitive applications, and long lead times — challenges that often disadvantage communities with fewer resources.

## **7.5 Barriers to Accessing Funding**

Despite the availability of funding, Sylvania Heights has historically struggled to benefit from these programs due to:

- **Jurisdictional fragmentation**
- **Limited local match funding**
- **Complex permitting requirements**
- **Competing regional priorities**
- **Administrative burdens on small communities**

These barriers underscore the importance of coordinated advocacy, technical assistance, and community-driven planning to ensure equitable access to resources.

## **7.6 The Importance of a Comprehensive Watershed Plan**

The 2025 Gap Creek watershed study is a pivotal step because it will:

- Provide the technical justification required for major grants
- Identify priority projects
- Establish cost estimates
- Strengthen competitive applications
- Support long-term resilience planning



A comprehensive, data-driven plan positions Sylvania Heights to secure the funding needed for transformative improvements.

## **8. Community Advocacy & Resilience**

### **8.1 A Legacy of Community Leadership**

For decades, the residents of Sylvania Heights and the Lovejoy neighborhood have been the driving force behind every meaningful step toward addressing the challenges posed by Gap Creek. Long before government agencies acknowledged the severity of the flooding, community members were documenting impacts, organizing neighbors, and demanding action. Their persistence has kept the issue alive through multiple administrations, budget cycles, and planning efforts.

Leaders such as Barry Gray, Deborah Riley, Lewis Jennings, and longtime residents who have shared their lived experiences have ensured that the story of Sylvania Heights is not erased or ignored. Their testimony has shaped public understanding of the neighborhood's struggles and has provided essential context for engineers, policymakers, and advocates.

### **8.2 Grassroots Organizing and Local Partnerships**

Community organizations have played a pivotal role in elevating environmental justice concerns and mobilizing resources. The Greater Sylvania Heights Front Porch, Inc. has been instrumental in:

- Securing Brownfield designation for parts of the neighborhood
- Achieving HUBZone status to support economic development
- Hosting community meetings and educational events
- Coordinating neighborhood cleanups and beautification efforts
- Serving as a liaison between residents and government agencies

These efforts have strengthened community cohesion and created platforms for residents to share their experiences and priorities.

### **8.3 NAACP Environmental and Climate Justice Leadership**

The Okaloosa County Branch, NAACP has been at the forefront of environmental justice advocacy in the region. Through its Environmental and Climate Justice Committee, chaired by Mr. Lewis Jennings, and assisted by Dr. Vivian Green, the Branch has:



- Documented flooding and infrastructure failures
- Filed public records requests to ensure transparency
- Engaged local, state, and federal officials
- Organized watershed tours to expose decision-makers to on-the-ground conditions
- Partnered with civic organizations to amplify community voices
- Advocated for equitable investment and accountability

This sustained advocacy has been essential in shifting the narrative from isolated flooding incidents to a systemic environmental justice issue requiring coordinated action.

## **8.4 Building Regional Coalitions**

In recent years, partnerships have expanded beyond the neighborhood. The Okaloosa Democratic Executive Committee, environmental groups, and civic organizations have joined forces with the NAACP to:

- Conduct site visits with elected officials
- Host public forums on environmental justice
- Engage media outlets to raise awareness
- Support grant applications and legislative requests
- Build momentum for state and federal involvement

These coalitions have helped transform local concerns into regional priorities.

## **8.5 Community Resilience in the Face of Adversity**

Despite decades of flooding, property damage, and health concerns, Sylvania Heights remains a resilient and deeply rooted community. Residents continue to invest in their homes, support their neighbors, and advocate for a safer, healthier environment.

Resilience is evident in:

- The determination to remain in the neighborhood despite repeated setbacks
- The willingness to engage in long, complex planning processes
- The commitment to educating younger generations about the community's history
- The insistence that environmental justice is not optional but essential



This resilience is not simply a response to adversity — it is a testament to the strength, dignity, and unity of the people who call Sylvania Heights home.

## 9. Comparative Models & Case Studies

### 9.1 Learning from Successful Urban Creek Restorations

Communities across the United States have faced challenges similar to those in the Sylvania Heights/Lovejoy area: aging infrastructure, chronic flooding, degraded waterways, and environmental injustices rooted in historical underinvestment. In response, many cities have turned to innovative, community-centered approaches that combine stormwater management with public amenities, ecological restoration, and neighborhood revitalization.

These projects demonstrate that effective solutions are possible — and that they can deliver benefits far beyond flood control.

### 9.2 Case Study: Good Neighbor Stormwater Park (North Miami, FL)

One of the most relevant examples is the **Good Neighbor Stormwater Park** in North Miami. Once a repetitive flood-loss property, the site was transformed into a multifunctional public space that:

- Stores and treats stormwater
- Reduces neighborhood flooding
- Improves water quality
- Provides recreational space
- Educates the public about environmental systems

#### Key Features

- A large retention basin designed to accommodate sea-level rise
- A bioswale that filters pollutants from runoff
- Native vegetation that stabilizes soils and enhances habitat
- Educational signage that “makes the invisible visible”
- A design that blends seamlessly into the surrounding neighborhood



## Lessons for Gap Creek

The project offers several insights applicable to Sylvania Heights:

- **Multifunctional design** can turn stormwater infrastructure into community assets.
- **Early engagement with permitting agencies** helps avoid delays.
- **Public-private partnerships** can expand funding opportunities.
- **Community input** ensures that the project reflects local needs and values.
- **Nature-based solutions** can be more resilient and cost-effective than traditional engineering alone.

The Good Neighbor Stormwater Park demonstrates that stormwater management can be both functional and beautiful — and that communities deserve infrastructure that enhances quality of life.

### 9.3 Case Study: Urban Creek Daylighting Projects

Across the country, cities have “daylighted” buried or degraded creeks to restore natural flow paths, reduce flooding, and improve ecological health. Examples include:

- **Arcadia Creek (Kalamazoo, MI)**
- **Saw Mill River (Yonkers, NY)**
- **Ravine Parkway (Cleveland, OH)**

These projects typically involve:

- Removing culverts or concrete channels
- Reestablishing natural streambanks
- Creating floodplain storage
- Adding greenways, trails, and parks

#### Relevance to Gap Creek

While full daylighting may not be feasible in all sections of Gap Creek, the principles are highly applicable:

- **Reconnect the creek to its floodplain** where possible
- **Stabilize banks using natural materials**
- **Increase channel capacity through ecological design**
- **Integrate public access and educational features**



These approaches can reduce erosion, improve water quality, and create safer, more resilient neighborhoods.

## 9.4 Case Study: Community-Led Watershed Planning

In cities like Atlanta, Baltimore, and Portland, community-driven watershed plans have reshaped how local governments approach stormwater and environmental justice. These efforts emphasize:

- Resident leadership
- Transparent decision-making
- Long-term monitoring
- Equitable investment
- Partnerships with universities and nonprofits

### Relevance to Sylvania Heights

Sylvania Heights is already demonstrating the core elements of successful community-led planning:

- Strong resident advocacy
- NAACP leadership
- Partnerships with civic and environmental groups
- Engagement with local, state, and federal officials

A formalized community-driven watershed plan could strengthen grant applications, guide long-term investment, and ensure that residents remain at the center of decision-making.

## 9.5 What These Models Show

Across all these examples, several themes emerge:

- **Flooding is solvable** with the right mix of engineering, ecological design, and community engagement.
- **Environmental justice communities** can and should receive infrastructure that is safe, modern, and dignified.
- **Nature-based solutions** often outperform traditional systems in resilience and cost-effectiveness.
- **Community leadership** is essential — and often the catalyst for meaningful change.



These models demonstrate that Sylvania Heights is not asking for anything extraordinary. The solutions needed here are the same solutions that have transformed neighborhoods across the country.

## 10. Recommendations

### 10.1 Overview

The challenges facing Sylvania Heights and the Gap Creek watershed are the result of decades of underinvestment, fragmented governance, and environmental neglect. Addressing these issues requires a coordinated, multi-layered strategy that blends engineering, ecological restoration, community leadership, and sustained governmental commitment.

The following recommendations are designed to:

- Reduce flooding
- Improve water quality
- Strengthen infrastructure
- Advance environmental justice
- Support long-term community resilience

These recommendations draw from best practices in watershed management, lessons from comparable case studies, and the lived experiences of Sylvania Heights residents.

### 10.2 Funding Equity and Prioritization

A central barrier to progress is the inequitable distribution of infrastructure funding. As documented in the January 2026 newsletter from Okaloosa County Commissioner Carolyn Ketchel, none of the \$279 million raised from the county's infrastructure surtax has been allocated for stormwater improvements in Sylvania Heights. Of the 57 projects funded, not a single one appears to be earmarked for any marginalized or underserved community. This persistent funding gap underscores the need for structural reforms to ensure that historically neglected neighborhoods receive their fair share of public investment.

### 10.3 Engineering and Infrastructure Recommendations

#### 1. Construct Additional Stormwater Retention Facilities



The existing 1.5-acre pond is insufficient to manage watershed-scale runoff. Additional retention capacity is essential to:

- Reduce peak flows
- Lower flood elevations
- Improve water quality
- Relieve pressure on downstream infrastructure

Priority sites include county-owned parcels acquired between 1997 and 2004.

## **2. Implement Nature-Based Solutions**

Nature-based approaches offer long-term resilience and cost-effective performance. Recommended measures include:

- Bioswales along key roadways
- Reestablishment of riparian buffers
- Floodplain reconnection where feasible
- Use of native vegetation for bank stabilization

These solutions reduce erosion, improve infiltration, and enhance ecological health.

## **3. Upgrade and Replace Aging Drainage Infrastructure**

Critical upgrades should include:

- Replacing undersized culverts
- Installing new storm drains in unserved areas
- Reinforcing vulnerable road crossings
- Conducting proactive maintenance to prevent failures like the Beal Parkway collapse

These improvements will reduce chronic flooding and improve public safety.

## **4. Conduct Channel Restoration and Debris Removal**

Restoration efforts should focus on:

- Removing fallen trees and blockages
- Stabilizing eroded banks
- Increasing channel capacity where appropriate
- Addressing sedimentation hotspots



These actions will improve flow conveyance and reduce localized flooding.

## **10.4 Water Quality and Public Health Recommendations**

### **5. Develop and Implement a TMDL Action Plan**

Given Gap Creek's impaired status for E. coli and fecal coliform, a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) plan is essential. The plan should:

- Identify pollutant sources
- Establish reduction targets
- Implement corrective actions
- Monitor progress over time

This will improve water quality and reduce public health risks.

### **6. Conduct a Comprehensive Community Health Assessment**

Partner with public health agencies and universities to evaluate:

- Cancer clusters
- Kidney disease prevalence
- Respiratory conditions
- Mold-related illnesses
- Long-term exposure risks

This assessment will provide clarity, guide interventions, and address community concerns.

### **7. Expand Public Health Outreach**

Provide residents with:

- Mold remediation guidance
- Floodwater safety information
- Resources for home repairs
- Access to testing for water and air quality

This empowers residents to protect their health while long-term solutions are implemented.



## **10.5 Governance and Policy Recommendations**

### **8. Establish a Gap Creek Intergovernmental Task Force**

This task force should include:

- Okaloosa County
- City of Fort Walton Beach
- Town of Cinco Bayou
- FDOT
- FDEP
- Community representatives
- NAACP leadership

Its purpose: coordinate planning, funding, permitting, and communication across jurisdictions.

### **9. Create a Dedicated Stormwater Funding Mechanism for Unincorporated and Marginalized Areas**

Establish a stormwater utility fee, special assessment district, or dedicated surtax allocation specifically for neighborhoods like Sylvania Heights. This would provide stable, long-term funding for infrastructure improvements and resilience projects.

Options include:

- A stormwater utility fee
- Special assessment district
- Dedicated surtax allocation

### **10. Prioritize Sylvania Heights/Lovejoy area in Resilience and Equity Planning**

Local governments should formally designate Sylvania Heights and the Lovejoy area as a priority area for:

- Resilience investments
- Environmental justice initiatives
- Infrastructure upgrades
- Grant applications

This ensures equitable distribution of resources.



## **10.6 Community Engagement and Capacity-Building Recommendations**

### **11. Formalize a Community-Led Watershed Advisory Group**

This group would:

- Provide input on project design
- Review plans and timelines
- Ensure transparency
- Maintain accountability
- Strengthen resident leadership

### **12. Expand Partnerships with Universities and Nonprofits**

Potential collaborations include:

- Hydrologic modeling
- Environmental monitoring
- Public health research
- Grant writing support
- Community education programs

These partnerships bring expertise and capacity to the community.

### **13. Prioritize Marginalized Communities in Resilience and Equity Planning**

Local governments should formally designate Sylvania Heights and similar neighborhoods as priority areas for resilience investments, environmental justice initiatives, infrastructure upgrades, and grant applications. This plan will help correct longstanding disparities in public investment and ensure that all residents benefit from countywide infrastructure improvements.

The plan should integrate:

- Flood mitigation
- Housing stability
- Public health
- Economic development
- Climate adaptation



A holistic approach ensures that improvements are sustainable and equitable.

## **10.7 Funding and Implementation Recommendations**

### **14. Leverage the Gap Creek Watershed Study for Grant Applications**

Use the study to pursue:

- FEMA BRIC and HMGP grants
- EPA water quality grants
- State resilience funding
- HUD CDBG-DR funds
- Brownfield redevelopment resources

A strong technical foundation increases competitiveness.

### **15. Expand Partnerships and Community Leadership**

Formalize a community-led watershed advisory group and expand partnerships with universities and nonprofits to bring expertise, capacity, and advocacy to the community.

These collaborations expand resources and community impact.

### **16. Implement a Phased, Multi-Year Capital Improvement Plan**

A phased approach allows:

- Prioritization of high-impact projects
- Alignment with funding cycles
- Transparent progress tracking
- Long-term planning and accountability

## **11. Conclusion**

Gap Creek is more than a stormwater challenge — it is a reflection of how history, policy, and infrastructure intersect with race, class, and geography to shape the lived experiences of a community. For the Sylvania Heights/Lovejoy area, the creek's chronic flooding, degraded water quality, and failing infrastructure are not isolated environmental issues; they are the cumulative result of decades of underinvestment, fragmented governance, and environmental injustice.



This report has traced the evolution of these challenges from the earliest days of rural settlement through the rapid post-war expansion of Fort Walton Beach, the demographic shifts of the 1960s, and the long arc of community advocacy that has defined the past forty years. It has documented the environmental and hydrologic conditions that drive flooding, the infrastructure vulnerabilities that magnify risk, and the public health concerns that weigh heavily on residents.

It has also highlighted the resilience, leadership, and determination of the Sylvania Heights community — a community that has refused to be silent, refused to be forgotten, and refused to accept environmental inequity as an inevitability.

Today, the region stands at a turning point.

With the 2025 watershed study underway, renewed attention from local and state officials, and growing recognition of environmental justice as a guiding principle, the opportunity exists to transform decades of frustration into meaningful, lasting progress. But this transformation will require:

- Coordinated intergovernmental action
- Sustained investment
- Transparent communication
- Community-centered planning
- A commitment to equity at every stage

The recommendations in this report provide a roadmap for that work. They call for modern infrastructure, nature-based solutions, public health assessments, dedicated funding mechanisms, and formal structures for community leadership. They emphasize that resilience is not only about engineering — it is about justice, dignity, and the right of every family to live in a safe and healthy environment.

The story of Gap Creek is still being written. With the right investments, the right partnerships, and the continued leadership of the Sylvania Heights community and the NAACP, the next chapter can be one of restoration, resilience, and renewal.

**This report is both a record of what has been endured and a blueprint for what must come next.**



# Appendix I — Annotated Sources

This appendix provides context for the key documents, assessments, news reports, and community testimonies that informed the findings and recommendations in this report.

## 1. Historical Subdivision Records (1953–1960s)

**Source Type:** County plat records, historical maps

**Relevance:** Documents the early development of Sylvania Heights, including the absence of paved roads, stormwater systems, and municipal utilities. Establishes the historical roots of today’s infrastructure deficits.

## 2. Oral Histories from Longtime Residents

**Source Type:** Community testimony

**Relevance:** Provides firsthand accounts of rural conditions prior to urbanization, early flooding experiences, and demographic shifts. Highlights the lived experience of environmental injustice.

## 3. Gap Creek Basin Studies (1978–2008)

**Source Type:** Engineering and hydrologic assessments

**Relevance:** Identifies chronic flooding, erosion, and sedimentation issues. Documents decades of recommendations that were never fully implemented.

## 4. Water Quality Assessments (FDEP, 2025)

**Source Type:** State environmental monitoring

**Relevance:** Confirms impairment for E. coli and fecal coliform. Supports the need for a TMDL and targeted water quality interventions.

## 5. FDOT Incident Reports (2025 Beal Parkway Collapse)

**Source Type:** Transportation infrastructure documentation

**Relevance:** Demonstrates the vulnerability of aging drainage systems and the broader impacts of hydrologic stress on regional infrastructure.



## **6. Okaloosa County Local Mitigation Strategy (LMS)**

**Source Type:** County hazard mitigation plan

**Relevance:** Identifies flooding as a priority hazard and outlines potential mitigation projects. Provides a framework for federal funding applications.

## **7. Brownfield and HUBZone Designation Documents**

**Source Type:** Federal and state economic development records

**Relevance:** Supports the community's status as a disadvantaged area eligible for targeted investment and redevelopment incentives.

## **8. Media Coverage and Public Testimony (2021–2025)**

**Source Type:** Local news, public meeting transcripts

**Relevance:** Highlights renewed attention to environmental justice concerns and documents community advocacy efforts.

## **9. 2025 Gap Creek Watershed Study Authorization**

**Source Type:** Okaloosa County Commission records

**Relevance:** Establishes the scope, funding, and objectives of the most comprehensive watershed assessment in decades. <https://midbaynews.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/GAP-CREEK-FLOODING-STUDY-APPROVED-1024x576.png>

## **10. Comparative Case Studies (Good Neighbor Stormwater Park, etc.)**

**Source Type:** Municipal project reports, academic literature

**Relevance:** Provides models for nature-based solutions and community-centered stormwater design.

## **11. Key Public Records and Newsletters**

**Source Type:** January 2026 Okaloosa County Newsletter — Commissioner Carolyn Ketchel

**Relevance:** Documents that, as of January 2026, none of the \$279 million raised from the county's infrastructure surtax has been allocated for stormwater improvements in Sylvania Heights. This public record provides critical context for the funding equity concerns and recommendations outlined in this report.



## Appendix II — Crosswalk Table: Sources to Report Sections

This crosswalk links each major section of the report to the sources that informed it.

<b>Report Section</b>	<b>Primary Sources Used</b>	<b>Purpose of Source</b>
Historical Development Patterns	County plat records; oral histories; demographic data	Establishes historical context and early infrastructure gaps
Environmental & Hydrologic Conditions	Basin studies; FDEP water quality data; engineering assessments	Documents flooding, erosion, sedimentation, and water quality impairments
Flooding & Infrastructure Vulnerabilities	FDOT reports; county maintenance records; resident testimony	Highlights chronic flooding, infrastructure failures, and structural damage
Public Health & Environmental Justice	Community testimony; environmental health literature; water quality data	Connects environmental conditions to health concerns and equity issues
Governmental & Intergovernmental Response	LMS documents; county commission records; city stormwater plans	Evaluates governmental actions, gaps, and coordination challenges
Funding Landscape	Federal and state grant program guidelines; local budget documents	Identifies funding opportunities and structural barriers
Community Advocacy & Resilience	NAACP records; community organization documents; media coverage	Demonstrates community leadership and grassroots organizing
Comparative Models & Case Studies	Municipal project reports; academic research	Provides examples of successful urban creek restoration
Recommendations	Synthesis of all sources	Develops actionable, evidence-based solutions



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