

# Subsidence . . . Gulf winds across Galveston Bay raise tides, threatening homeowners in Baytown's subdivision

**Associated Press**  
BAYTOWN — The summer nights are the worst. Those balmy, "easy livin'" evenings along the Texas Gulf Coast are long, dark hours of uncertainty and fear for Baytown's Brownwood subdivision, a neighborhood under siege.

The subdivision is sinking, slowly, centimeter by centimeter. The once picturesque waters of Crystal Lake and Scott's Bay have become relentless threats of life and property.

It takes only a strong southerly wind out of the Gulf, whipping across Galveston Bay and up the long channel toward Baytown, to send high tides lapping over roads, across yards and into houses.

"Volunteer firemen will come in the night, knocking on doors and warning us that the tides are coming up," says Mrs. Victor H. Appelt, whose family has lived in Brownwood for 16 years.

"We woke up one night and heard sirens," she recalled. "My husband and I got in the cars and drove out through fender-deep water, dodging floating logs."

During the summer months, she said, "the outside lights burn all night and people worry about every little storm."

"Most people keep things ready to move away from rising water during the summer," said Mrs. Doc George, a neighbor of the Appelts. "It's an everyday threat and you worry about getting a warning. I know some who have heard too late and were trapped. They had to spend the night in their attics."

One couple awoke in the night to find their home awash. They splashed through darkness to their baby's room and found the infant floating on a crib mattress.

Boats are parked in the driveways at some residences. Some park their cars on nearby elevated streets.

It's all been a gradually intensifying way of life for many Brownwood residents for several years now. And there's no hope of improvement.

Brownwood is slowly being wiped out by a phenomenon called earth subsidence. The ground is literally sinking, collapsing like a leaky balloon. Since the community is beside an arm of Galveston Bay, the sea nibbles away at the shoreline, slowly claiming broad expanses of land.

Once Brownwood was a gracious neighborhood of large, comfortable wareside homes. Tall trees arched gracefully over roadways and shaded wide, verdant lawns. The backyards of many homes sloped gently to the water. The bay was a peaceful playground for fishing and sailing.

"It was just beautiful," Mrs. Appelt said.

But subsidence has turned the playground into a battleground. In the last decade, homeowners have spent thousands of dollars on seawalls to hold back the water and on home repairs when the walls failed. Their efforts have been brushed aside by the invading sea.

Some homes are now inundated for several days each year. One brick two-story home stands surrounded by water.

Experts say Brownwood is paying the price for the massive thirst of nearby Houston and its industries.

Houston is atop an aquifer in the Beaumont Clays, a geologic formation deposited thousands of years ago. A huge underground reservoir of water is trapped in pockets of sand within the clays.

About 170 billion gallons of water annually are pumped from the aquifer to quench the needs of the area's flourishing population and its industrial complex.

As the water is pumped from the sands, water flows from the clays. The fine sand compresses in an effect similar to that of a sponge shrinking as it dries.

The result is subsidence. As the deep pockets compress, surface ground above sinks steadily.

Since Brownwood was built, some areas of the neighborhood have sunk as much as six feet. Subsidence also has affected other areas around Gal-

veston Bay.

The cities of Kemah, Seabrook, Pasadena and La Porte all suffer some effects of subsidence flooding. The San Jacinto Battleground State Park, just across the channel from Baytown, has lost many acres to subsidence flooding. Some park roads are constantly under water. At the Johnson Space Center, buildings are sinking up to five inches a year.

But Brownwood is the worst.

The Army Corps of Engineers conducted months of complex studies on ways to rescue the subdivision. But experts determined there was no economical salvation for Brownwood.

"We decided the best thing to do would be to permanently evacuate the residents, level the land and surrender it to the sea," said Chester Pawlik, a government chief engineer. "There are 750 acres and 448 families involved. The cost is estimated at \$16.9 million."

After the homes are razed, he said, the area would be used as a park. But eventually it will be covered by water.

The homes would be purchased by the government, which would pay "fair market value," Pawlik said. This value, he said, would be based on "a comparison of recent sales in the area."

At that rate, Mrs. Appelt says, "we'll be getting peanuts for our property."

Baytown Century Twenty-One Co. realtor Jim Setley agrees. "Those properties are selling for about half of what they would bring in another area," he said. "While houses have doubled in value elsewhere, just the opposite happened in Brownwood. And some of it was really exceptional property."

A lot of people there, he adds, "are going down the tubes."

Some subdivision homeowners have already abandoned their houses in despair, Mrs. George said.

"They've been forced out and are still making house payments on homes they can't even live in," she said. "Some of them are just ruined."

Pawlik said the government is empowered by the Uniform Reloca-

tion Act to award grants of up to \$15,000 to "help make up for the loss" that some of the homeowners will experience.

But even this grant would not be enough to equalize the loss by some, Setley said.

"Many of them will never be able to afford houses as big as the ones they're leaving," he said.

The Texas Legislature created a Subsidence District, the first in the state, for Harris and Galveston counties. The district is limiting the number of water wells and the amount of water pumped. Heavy industrial water users have been told to start switching to surface water.

A series of canals has been constructed by an Industrial Water Authority to bring surface water to industries along the Houston Ship Channel from reservoirs to the north.

These efforts may head off subsidence in the future but they will have no effect on areas already flooded because of sinking land.

Scientists who have studied the problem said even if all water pump-

ing was halted, it would be for subsidence to stop.

Experts also say there will be a "rebound" of the sunken land between the sands of the Bay Clays, it probably won't rise, even if the sands of the bay are naturally recharged.

Buy up the Brownwood under study by federal agencies may be presented to Congress this year. But before any action is taken, the plan faces long hearings and study.

"Nothing may come of this year or later," said one expert.

Until then, lights will flash summer nights in Brownwood more than 400 families will be "Every time a ship goes sends a wall of water up the yard," Mrs. Appelt said.

"I lay in bed at night and she says, 'After a ship goes hear that water come up seawall and into the yard.'"

"It keeps getting closer."

## Library sponsors book sale

National Library Week, April 4-10, sponsored by the Texas A&M University Library, will include a book sale, poetry reading and exhibits.

The University Library's lending print collection will benefit from an April 7 book sale staged by the Friends of the Texas A&M Library.

The sale will offer books, magazines, sheet music, posters and other items and it will run from 10:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. on the mall on the east side of the library.

Sale items are being donated. Contributions may be dropped at the library, McDonald's and area food stores.

Also planned is an April 13 poetry reading. Set at 7:30 p.m. in room 226 of the library, it will feature selections by A&M graduate and undergraduate students. A reception follows.

A display on "Mutilation of Library Materials" will be on the first floor of the library during the week.

## Lecture series begun on works of Solzhenitsyn

A four-part lecture series on the literary works of Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn begins at Texas A&M today.

The lectures, sponsored by the A&M Russian Club are by Dr. George V. Grebenshikov, assistant professor of modern languages at Texas A&M.

Today's program is a 7:30 p.m. discussion of the Nobel Prize-winning "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich" in Rudder Tower 604.

All the open, no-admission programs are at 7:30 p.m., notes Grebenshikov, with the final three in Memorial Student Center 140A.

Dates of the other three programs are "The First Circle," April 14; "Cancer Ward," April 21; and "Gulag Archipelago," April 29.

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