

## Drainage isn't a new problem in Kingsland

The effects of Hurricane Irma on Camden County were indeed catastrophic, but many Kingsland residents wonder whether the disaster was partly of the city's making.

Residents from those flood-stricken areas turned out in droves to Kingsland's council meeting on Monday and the testimony was heart-wrenching. Our fellow citizens are suffering and we pray that help will come sooner rather than later.

We are so thankful that we live in a close-knit community where our nonprofits, churches, youth groups and good Samaritans have stepped up and filled some of those gaps, big and small. The needs are many and these households will take months or years to repair. We will need those efforts to continue.

Our government cannot always save us from events like these, but there is much that can be done to mitigate disasters before they happen. A big reason why we pay taxes is so that our city and county leaders can keep their eye on the big picture.

Kingsland leaders have known for years that many of their neighborhoods have drainage problems, so they should have seen this disaster coming from a million miles away. This is not the first time that some of those residents have complained to the council.

They certainly should have seen it from 11 months away when the comparatively minimal effects of Hurricane Matthew shut down the city's sewer system and backed up water into neighborhoods.

The outages and ensuing boil order closed businesses, bringing the economy to a halt for a day or two. That alone was catastrophe for some families.

Yet in the last several city council elections, drainage has not been a dominant part of the conversation when candidates have talked about what Kingsland needs. With two council posts up for election on Nov. 7, we expect that to change.

We also expect citizens to be more vigilant in holding their elected officials accountable for fixing those problems, having seen how high the stakes truly are.

**How to submit a letter:** Letters must include the writer's full name, street address and telephone number. Writers are limited to 500 words and one letter per 20 days. Submit to editor1@tds.net.

## Tribune & Georgian

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

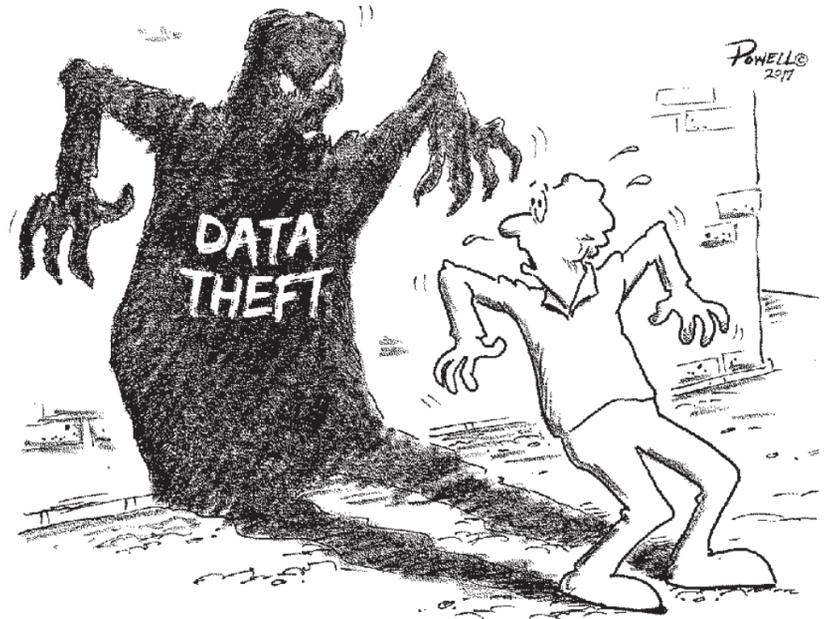
### City didn't take responsibility for sewer back flow

Dear Editor,

This is in response to Jim Stein's letter, "Is the city serving citizens well?" We have lived, worked and raised our family in St. Marys since 1982, and we love our city. However, we, too, can testify that perhaps the St. Marys sewer system is not maintained in a condition that protects homeowners from destructive and costly sewage back flow into homes.

We lived in our house on Palmetto Street from 1984 to 2008, and not until Hurricane Matthew, did we discover how vulnerable our home is to a sewer system backup. You may call me naive, but I was simply unaware of the terribly costly and toxic risk that we were exposed to being connected to the city sewer system.

We never once had experienced any backflow problems through countless storms and power outages over nearly 25 years, until Matthew, when apparently because power was interrupted to the sewer pump systems, it resulted in a back flow of the city sewer system into our home, filling every room with contaminated sewer waste water and sludge. It covered and destroyed the laminate floors of all three bedrooms and required that wet and contaminated drywall throughout the house be cut out approximately 2 feet up from the floor and the drying, cleaning and sanitizing of the entire house.



The damages, of course, required the replacement of drywall in every room, painting of all rooms, replacement of all baseboards, five door casings and replacement of vanities in both bathrooms. With the help of dear friends, our total out-of-pocket cost was "limited" to \$12,000.

Has the sewer system been properly maintained? I don't know but when I informed the city about what happened, I had no response. Then we received a letter from Gallagher Bassett in Atlanta, a claim service for the city that works to "deliver demonstrably superior outcomes for ... organizations." Well it worked for the city. A company representative told us that our home damages from the city sewer system were the result of "an act of God," and the city had no responsibility. I won't give God "credit" for the damages but He has

been faithful to bless and provide for our family.

We were better prepared for Irma, and while the sewer still backed up into the bathtub, it didn't overflow and fill the house. I believe that if the St. Marys sewer system is certain to back flow into homes during a lift station power failure and the city is not going to install any device to restrict the back flow, then it should at least inform sewer system customers of the potential risk, so the homeowner will know to take whatever steps necessary to prevent this from happening.

As I said, we love our city, we pray for it and its leaders, and it's beautiful and I believe in answer to Jim's question, it does serve citizens well, but its response to this personal catastrophic event was more than very disappointing.

Paul Hafer  
St. Marys

### Help is a call away in Camden

Dear Editor,

One year ago, through the efforts of Steven Sainz at Camden Family Connection, Tom Canning and a group of food providers from throughout Camden County, the all-volunteer Camden Hunger Hotline began.

Within weeks Hurricane Matthew came and the hotline responded to 19 calls. In the first year of operation, we answered more than 120 calls, logged more than 4,400 volunteer hours and did this all for less than \$25 a month. Our only expenses are the phone provided by Camden Family Connection and publicity that was underwritten by several individuals.

Almost a year later, Hurricane Irma hit our area and

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## Building St. Marys back better



**John Morrissey**  
Guest columnist

It could have been worse for many of us, but for some of our citizens and businesses Irma and her companion tornados dealt a damaging blow to their lives and livelihoods.

Cleanup is well underway as city and county staff work closely with federal and state agencies to speed up the processes. As reported earlier, individual owners of the waterfront docks — the City of St. Marys, the National Park Service, the Department of Natural Resources and private owner Calvin Lang — along with the Coast Guard, FEMA and The Army Corps of Engineers are working together to strategize how best to remove sunken boats and debris while also concentrating on solutions to find the fastest and safest location from which we can ferry visitors to Cumberland Island.

This multi-discipline collaboration is unprecedented and is yet another example of how our community and government departments and agencies are coming together to deliver solutions. I am confident we will collectively find a way to get the St. Marys water-based economy moving again quickly.

But what I want to share today is not about next week or next month, but how we as a community can take this natural disaster and turn it into an opportunity to make the St. Marys waterfront more attractive, more appealing, more boater-friendly and more tourist-friendly than ever before. We all love our waterfront and our recent master plan citizen interviews overwhelmingly supported

the vision of developing the waterfront as the key to rebuilding St. Marys. As painful as it has been to watch the aftermath of the storm devastation, the upside is that we can rebuild and we can rebuild better and stronger. In the past we operated on the theory that St. Marys was protected from major storms as we were cradled in the Georgia Bite. Two major storms in less than a year tell us that the reality has changed. We are still less vulnerable than the states and cities north and south of us, but we are nevertheless vulnerable. That means that the city docks, the park service docks and the privately owned docks must be rebuilt to higher standards.

We continue to believe St. Marys is the perfect community to attract the marine industry and the pleasure boating crowd but we have to be strategic and bold in how we construct our new docks and waterfront. The permitting and approval for these improvements by the state and federal agencies will be a challenge but one we are willing to take on since it will assure the water-

front potential is realized.

Right now, we have to get the sunken boats out of the water, out of the marsh and off the river wall and park. This is already underway. But at the same time we need to plan for not whether we rebuild but how we rebuild. That is my focus right now, dealing with state and federal officials as we comply with all the rules and regulations necessary to rebuild rather than repair so we can create structures capable of withstanding storms yet functional and attractive enough to appeal to the growing marine and boating community. If we do this right, it will create the boost to the St. Marys long-term economy we have all sought.

While I started my thoughts with the waterfront because of the massive damage, the same strategy holds true for the rest of the city. In some instances we just need to repair. In others, we need to replace and rebuild in the manner our master plan envisions. We want to maintain our small-town ambiance, but we want a healthy and prosperous economy for our people. That means not just touch-ups or quick repairs but thoughtful strategic enhancements to rebuild St. Marys.

The water and sewer systems were maintained during the storm but were challenged mightily. We know that additional backup systems and redundant key infrastructure components are needed to guarantee we not only manage through a storm but also are positioned for quick and effective post-storm efforts. We have such

programs in place now but Irma showed us we need additional equipment and measures in place immediately after the storm. Irma once again showed us how important an active storm water program is to protect the various areas of the city.

Once we get beyond the immediacy of the losses and clean up from Irma, we need to consider this an opportunity for residents, businesses and our general economy to create a more robust and resilient city and community. I plan to devote my full energies to making it happen. It's an old saying but when you are given lemons, the best strategy is to make lemonade. We can do this if we work together.

While local government is taking the lead, this type of rebuilding will require the support, expertise and commitment from residents, businesses, and religious and civic groups. It will happen only if we each take a positive and vocal role in pushing a "Build Back Better" agenda. As we move forward there will be ways in which anyone who wants to be a part of the action can do so. Right now, it means recognizing the opportunity and creating the momentum for getting it done. Now is the time to pull together like never before with focus, clarity, optimism and a common goal of helping St. Marys reach its full potential as an economically thriving community.

John Morrissey is the mayor of St. Marys. He can be contacted at john.morrissey@stmarysga.gov or (912) 510-4041.