Water line break causes basements to flood.

City workers may have water line issues under control for the moment but damage to basements because of one break will take longer to repair.

Water gushing from a four-inch hole on a main line near 20th Street and Lake Avenue on July 21 caused water and sewage to back up in the homes of several property owners.

Bruce Clymer, city administrator, encouraged residents with damage to file claims with the city's insurance adjuster.

However on Monday, several of the homeowners received letters from the insurance company stating that their claims would not be honored.

Clymer said an option would be to see an attorney, noting that the city is involved in a lawsuit with residents whose property was damaged during a deluge in June of 2010.

He added that city officials feel horrible about what has happened, noting that property owners have a lot of damage.

One of the homeowners, Jim Bebensee, said the basements of seven homes on Lake Avenue, between 20th and 16th streets, experienced leakage.

Bebensee, who lives at 1602 Lake Ave., said he and wife, Jodi, are looking at between $30,000 and $40,000 in damage.

About four inches of water and sewage gurgled up through shower and sewer drains and filled seven rooms of a finished basement, he said.

Carpet, tile, walls and furniture will have to be replaced plus the cost of professionally cleaning the rooms, Bebensee said.

Sewage backup insurance is available but because of the expense, he said the couple doesn't have it and homeowner insurance doesn't typically cover such damage.

City services director Shane Gruber said sewage mixed with water in a sewer manhole adjacent to the water line at 20th Street and Lake Avenue.

Water shot up under the pavement after the break and the pressure created a cavity that filled with water and leaked into the manhole, he explained.

Bebensee said he understands that breaks can occur in lines but is disappointed at how city officials handled the situation.

After the break, he said Jodi and their son started cleaning up before they knew sewage had contaminated the watery mess.

"I'm frustrated that the city didn't call and let any of us know there was raw sewage involved so

we wouldn't be wading around in it," Bebensee said. "Sewage poses health concerns."

Clymer said he understands Bebensee's frustration.

However he said the break occurred on a weekend and that a limited city crew was focused on trying to stop the leak.

Early last week, a company from Kearney, washed and vacuumed the sewer line along Lake Avenue from 20th to 11th streets, because of the amount of mud lining manholes from the initial break.

Water pressure from the cleaning caused more sewage to leak into some of the homes that had already been affected and another house along Lake Avenue, Bebensee said.

That prompted city workers to go door to door alerting neighbors from 15th to 17th streets along Lake Avenue, Gruber said.

Before the leak, Bebensee said he and his wife had made several improvements to their home.

Now with a damaged basement, he said the home has lost up to $40,000 in equity.

Travis Coe, who lives at 1716 Lake Ave., said the home he shares with his wife, Jill, and children, suffered considerable damage from water, sewer and sand backing up through a downstairs toilet and shower.

Coe said damage to walls and floors, plus clean-up costs, was more than $6,000.

“And that doesn’t include damage to contents which included cards and gifts for our new baby boy that was born July 16,” he said.

For city services director Shane Gruber, seven water breaks so far this summer have also caused headaches for him and the street crew.

In addition to aging water lines and valves, Gruber said he thinks the dryness of soil where pipes are buried have caused them to shift.

“And the rain we’ve had this summer has just penetrated the surface,” he said.

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