EMERGENCY

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The city's infrastructure was crumbling for years before the devastation unleashed in 2005 by levee breaches in Hurricane Katrina's aftermath. The federal government earmarked billions of dollars for repairs and upgrades after the hurricane, but the problems have persisted. Streets are potholed with potholes and sinkholes. The city's water system has been plagued by leaks from broken pipes and raw sewage entering the drainage system.

New Orleans' municipal pumping system is supposed to move water out of the low-lying city. Having the system crippled in August could not come at a worse time for New Orleans, since the Gulf Coast is in the middle of hurricane season.

But officials feared that even a common thunderstorm would test the system's reduced capacity. "With great prayer and a lot of hard work, hopefully we'll be OK," the mayor said. Landrieu's office said in a news release early Thursday the city has lost service from one of its turbines, which powers most of the pumping stations that serve the East Bank of New Orleans. Landrieu said that means the system's capacity to drain storm water from the streets has been diminished. "It was an internal fire within the turbine itself, and it was a critical part," Landrieu said. The mayor said the city is bringing in generators to back up the system and hopes to have them installed within 48 hours. Earlier, Landrieu said the power available early Thursday wouldn't be adequate to protect the city from another massive rainfall. National Weather Service meteorologist Phil Grigsby said scattered thunderstorms and showers were in the daily forecast for the region through the weekend and into next week. But he called that a "fairly normal (weather) pattern" for south Louisiana in August. "We can get a quick band of 1 to 2 inches of rain in an hour. Normally (the pumps) can handle that," Grigsby said. "But with the reduced capacity, it's something we have to keep an eye on." Earlier this week, city officials and spokespeople had said repeatedly that all 24 pumping stations were working at full capacity. But after the system failed to keep up with a storm that dropped 9.4 inches of rain in three hours, the truth about the state of the water pumps began to emerge. Despite what the public had been led to believe, City Council members were then told that new stations in two of the hardest-hit areas went down to half to two-thirds capacity on Saturday, news outlets reported. "It is unacceptable that the public was not only uninformed, but misinformed as to our drainage system functionality during the flood," council member LaToya Cantrell said in a statement Wednesday. Cedric Grant, one of the mayor's top deputies and head of the Sewerage & Water Board, told the council Tuesday that he would retire at the end of hurricane season, which lasts through November. Public Works Director Mark Jernigan submitted his resignation shortly after the council meeting, when he was asked whether his agency had done enough to clearing the catch basins that feed the drainage system. Landrieu said he also wanted the board to fire Joseph Becker, the Sewerage & Water Board's general superintendent.

A worker site Thursday inside the New Orleans Sewerage & Water Board Facility, where turbines have failed, in New Orleans. Gov. John Bel Edwards declared a state of emergency in New Orleans on Thursday as the city's malfunctioning water-pumping system left some neighborhoods at greater risk of foul weather flooding.

"With great prayer and a lot of hard work, hopefully we'll be OK."--Mayor Mitch Landrieu

"I'm doing what I can, not that it will really matter if the pumps aren't working," she said.

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