



Community Buy-In Makes the Difference in Jackson

Full Mitigation Best Practice Story

Jackson County, Ohio

Jackson, OH - Unlike many of the communities which suffered major damage in the March 1997 flood, Jackson, Ohio, (population 6,700) is located more than 30 miles from the Ohio River in the state's hilly and scenic southeastern corner. The sources of its recurring flood problems are Horse Creek and Salt Lick Creek, two usually unthreatening streams that carry runoff from nearby high ground through the town on their way to the Ohio.



When the area around Jackson receives unusually heavy rains, as it did on March 1-2, 1997, both narrow, winding creeks often receive more rapid runoff from miles of surrounding hillsides than their banks can contain. Drainage and stream flows are impacted to some degree by upstream stretches of land formerly used for logging and strip mining, and the creeks also receive heavy runoff from recently widened stretches of U.S. Route 35--now a major four-lane highway.

Homes in several low-lying and poorly drained areas of the town suffered considerable damage in 1963, 1968 and again in 1975 when sustained spring rains took the creeks out of their banks. But according to Jackson city building projects coordinator Story Cool and Mayor Tom Evans, the March 1997 downpour and its aftermath caused "the worst flooding anyone around here can remember." One often-damaged area, roughly a half-mile square along Central Avenue and Freeman Street that suffered street flooding and standing water after even normal rains, was under so much moving water for so long during the '97 event that dozens of homes were destroyed or damaged beyond repair.

"FEMA and OEMA recovery teams arrived while the water was still receding, and set up a Disaster Recovery Center at the local Odd Lots store," said Evans. Once streets were re-opened, utilities were back in operation and debris removal underway, Evans said he and his service director met with OEMA Mitigation Branch staff in Columbus to learn about the HMGP program and discuss submitting a local mitigation grant proposal. "Overall, we had 190 homes and several business structures with flood damage, so one of our first jobs was to set priorities and focus on using limited grant money most effectively," said Evans. "One of the points OEMA emphasized was that, because it's a voluntary process, all our efforts at the city government level would be pointless if the community wasn't onboard with the plan we developed. So as soon as we got back from Columbus, we set up a really broad-based planning committee to go through the ten-step process and develop our proposal."

Owners and renters of damaged properties, local safety and housing authorities, civic and neighborhood groups, environmental groups, financial institutions, churches, news media and other opinion leaders were invited to serve on the community planning committee. Meanwhile, the damaged structures were inspected and a database was assembled, which helped the planning committee compare recent and past flood repair costs, elevation levels, historical depths of water and the percentage of properties totally or substantially damaged in effected areas.

Evans noted that, at an early point in the planning process, several members of the committee strongly advocated that the best mitigation strategy would be to dredge the creek beds at several choke points. "We had experts from the Department of Natural Resources and Army Corps of Engineers come to the next meeting and listen to their suggestions. They explained that dredging wouldn't prevent flooding after heavy rains...just move it downstream another few hundred yards," said Evans. "They told us the real problem was that these creeks are going to overflow periodically no matter what you do, and that our most damaged neighborhood was going to keep on getting flooded because it sits smack in the middle of the natural flood plain."

After they got that information and were able to ask a few questions, Evans said even the strongest advocates of dredging backed away from that alternative and ultimately supported property acquisition as the best course of action. He also noted that, when one property owner in the most-damaged area became a vocal critic, she was invited to join the committee, look at all information it was reviewing and be an active participant in developing its proposal.

"Bringing her 'inside the tent' was the smartest thing we ever did," said Evans. "Instead of relying on rumors and inaccurate information, she had a chance to see that there really was a careful review of facts and all the practical options, and that our decisions were being based on what would protect the public and be the most cost-effective. In the end, she went back and talked to her neighbors and became one of the most effective advocates we had for the voluntary acquisition program."

The City of Jackson received a \$288,000 HMGP grant and state and local matching funds that allowed it to acquire 4 vacant lots and permanently remove 31 repetitively damaged structures from the flood-prone area along Central Avenue and Freeman Street.

The mostly low-income residents of the mitigated neighborhood received what Mayor Evans called "a once-in-a-lifetime chance to get a good price for property they could probably never sell otherwise...and to move to better housing." Of those who accepted buyouts, virtually all remained as part of the local community and economy.

Local safety forces were relieved of the dangerous chore of going into the mitigated area in boats to rescue elderly residents, as they had done in 1997 and earlier flooding. "It was a nightmare scenario for our people, the thought of going in there in the middle of the night and maybe tipping over a boat full of old folks," said Evans.

While no public use for the mitigated property had been determined as of early 2002, local officials were hopeful that future improvements consistent with the area's susceptibility to high water would make it a recreational asset.

With regard to the value of wide public involvement in developing mitigation proposals, Mayor Evans has become a believer. "Whoever set up the process was right," he offered. "We would have had a lot more [problems], and probably a lot less participation by property owners if we hadn't had the community right there at the table looking at the facts and participating in the decision-making," he said.

Activity/Project Location

Geographical Area: **Single County in a State**

FEMA Region: **Region V**

State: **Ohio**

County: **Jackson County**

City/Community: **Jackson**

Key Activity/Project Information

Sector: **Private**

Hazard Type: **Flooding**

Activity/Project Type: **Acquisition/Buyouts**

Activity/Project Start Date: **01/1998**

Activity/Project End Date: **Ongoing**

Funding Source: **Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP)**

Funding Recipient: **Local Government**

Activity/Project Economic Analysis

Cost: **Amount Not Available**

Non FEMA Cost:

Activity/Project Disaster Information

Mitigation Resulted From Federal
Disaster? **Yes**

Federal Disaster #: **1164 , 03/04/1997**

Value Tested By Disaster? **Unknown**

Repetitive Loss Property? **Unknown**

Reference URLs

Reference URL 1: <http://www.floodsmart.gov/>

Reference URL 2: <http://www.ema.ohio.gov/>

Main Points

- According to Jackson city building projects coordinator Story Cool and Mayor Tom Evans, the March 1997 downpour and its aftermath caused "the worst flooding anyone around here can remember."
- Once streets were re-opened, utilities were back in operation and debris removal underway, Evans said he and his service director met with OEMA Mitigation Branch staff in Columbus to learn about the HMGP program and discuss submitting a local mitigation grant proposal.
- The City of Jackson received a \$288,000 HMGP grant and state and local matching funds that allowed it to acquire 4 vacant lots and permanently remove 31 repetitively damaged structures from the flood-prone area along Central Avenue and Freeman Street.



Flood-prone property after the acquisition in Jackson