



HMGP Buy-Outs Benefit Two Pennsylvania Communities

Full Mitigation Best Practice Story

Luzerne County, Pennsylvania

Luzerne County, PA – Margie Thomas has lived and worked in the Wyoming Valley area all her life. There, she has witnessed many disasters and the hardships they bring to the affected communities.



As a longtime employee of the Luzerne County Redevelopment Authority, Ms. Thomas has first hand knowledge about disasters and disaster recovery. She has witnessed members of the community lose their homes and property, and struggle to get back on their feet.

Plains and Hunlock Townships are located in a low-lying area close to the Susquehanna River. Families there have been residents for generations, or “old stock” as Ms. Thomas affectionately calls them. “Structures consist of mostly single family, moderate income residences,” she said. The river often floods during storms, subjecting residents to personal property loss and a time consuming and extensive cleanup.

Flooding in 1996 mobilized the townships to participate in FEMA’s Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP). Following a major disaster declaration, the HMGP funds up to 75 percent of the eligible costs of a project that will reduce or eliminate damages from future natural hazard events. Administered and funded by the Commonwealth and FEMA, and with the willing participation of homeowners, a buy-out project was undertaken in 1998. The cost of the Plains Township project was \$906,823, and the cost of the Hunlock Township project \$451,645. The structures located in the floodplain were bought and demolished, leaving empty open spaces in perpetuity. There are plans to turn one area into a recreational field and the other into a riverfront picnic area.

“There is now a general feeling of gratefulness, where before there was only despair,” noted Ms. Thomas. “Plains and Hunlock Township residents have benefited greatly from the buyout... [They now have] peace of mind... Some residents – older ones especially – find it hard to move away from their homes. But now, after making that hard decision, they lead happier, safer lives,” she added.

The HMGP provides long-term solutions to hazards such as flooding. An acquisition removes people and property from harm’s way by either demolishing or relocating flood-prone homes, and returns the area to open space, thereby restoring the natural function of the floodplain. The local government becomes the new owner of the acquired land, and only uses compatible with open space are permitted, such as parks, basketball courts, or walking paths. “The government pays fair market value during purchase of the properties,” Ms. Thomas explained. “If anyone [who as experienced flooding] has the opportunity to participate in a buy out, I strongly recommend they do so,” she asserted.

Activity/Project Location

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

FEMA Region: **Region III**

State: **Pennsylvania**

County: **Luzerne County**

City/Community: **Plains**

Key Activity/Project Information

Sector: **Public**
Hazard Type: **Flooding**
Activity/Project Type: **Acquisition/Buyouts**
Structure Type: **Wood Frame**
Activity/Project Start Date: **10/1997**
Activity/Project End Date: **04/2003**
Funding Source: **Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP)**
Funding Recipient: **Local Government**
Funding Recipient Name: **Plains and Hunlock Townships**
Application/Project Number: **9999**

Activity/Project Economic Analysis

Cost: **\$1,358,468.00 (Actual)**
Non FEMA Cost:

Activity/Project Disaster Information

Mitigation Resulted From Federal
Disaster? **Yes**
Federal Disaster #: **1093 , 01/21/1996**
Federal Disaster Year: **1996**
Value Tested By Disaster? **Yes**
Tested By Federal Disaster #: **No Federal Disaster specified**
Year First Tested: **2006**
Repetitive Loss Property? **Unknown**

Reference URLs

Reference URL 1: <http://www.fema.gov/government/grant/hmgp/index.shtm>
Reference URL 2: <http://www.pema.state.pa.us/>

Main Points

- Plains and Hunlock Townships are located in a low-lying area close to the Susquehanna River.
- The river often floods during storms, subjecting residents to personal property loss and a time consuming and extensive cleanup.
- Flooding in 1996 mobilized the townships to participate in FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP).
- Administered and funded by the Commonwealth and FEMA, and with the willing participation of homeowners, a buy-out project was undertaken in 1998.
- The cost of the Plains Township project was \$906,823, and the cost of the Hunlock Township project \$451,645. The structures located in the floodplain were bought and demolished, leaving empty open spaces in perpetuity.



Margie Thomas at site of future recreational field.



Future riverfront picnic area.