

Combating Floodwaters While Living on Fish River

Baldwin County, AL – In 2014, Fish River experienced nothing short of a historic flood. Rain fell at a rate of several inches an hour throughout the night. The river swelled to record levels, surpassing flood stages set during Hurricane Danny 17 years earlier.

The rising water caused many residents to flee their homes during the night. Many roads through South Baldwin County were closed and some neighborhoods were cut off leaving people stranded and calling for help.

Returning home after the April 30 flood event, Daniel Godard realized all of his research and hard work had paid off. While some residents returned to homes completely inundated with floodwaters, his home was virtually unscathed. It sustained 12 to 16 inches of floodwaters at grade foundation.

“I knew the area floods. The only prudent thing to do was to build so that my home wouldn’t be impacted by the flood,” said Godard, a retired Director of Risk Management for Alabama’s Retirement System. “I bought the property in 1986, but chose not to build until 2008. I researched the area’s flood history and I watched floods in between to see just what I needed to do.”

Prior to building his home, Godard obtained a certificate of elevation. This certificate establishes the elevation of the lowest floor of the home relative to the flood level. It is critical to the safety of any home in a high-risk flood area. A community's permit file must have an official record that shows new buildings and substantial improvements (post mapping) in all Special Flood Hazard Areas (SFHAs) are properly elevated. This elevation information is needed to show compliance with the floodplain management ordinance.

“I was told that I needed to build up 10 feet. I decided to go up 15 feet.” said Godard.

Godard’s 1700-square foot home sits on 16 – 15-foot wooded pilings. The concrete slab is 3 feet above the island’s grade. He backfilled and landscaped the area so that the height of the slab would not be noticeable and graded the driveway so that it is on a gradual incline. The HVAC unit is also elevated. He built what he refers to as, a cage on the subfloor. It is a storage area, designed with breakaway walls.

“I built it with floods and hurricanes in mind,” Godard said.

Breakaway walls are not part of the structural support of the building and are intended through its design and construction to collapse under specific lateral loading forces, without causing damage to the elevated portion of the building or supporting foundation system.

“During the flood, everything in the storage room stayed in the room. Everything, on the patio floated away,” said Godard. “I also purchased a used trailer to house lawn equipment and other items to ensure their safety. When there is an impending flood, I hook the trailer up to my truck and haul it away.”

He plans to install a floating device that will trigger his alarm system. “That way, I will not have to rely on my neighbor to call and say, ‘Hey get up! It’s time to get out of there’ the next time it floods.”



Godard offers advice to other homebuilders. “Look at history. You can see what type of floods and hurricanes have come through. Get to know the area and build to protect your investment. If you live in a flood-prone area, you have to make certain that your home is protected. Equate that to going into a snake field. If you’re going, you need to wear leggings. It just makes sense.”

For additional information, visit: www.fema.gov and www.townofmagnoliasprings.org.