

New Jersey Acquisition Project

State-wide, New Jersey – Four of the last five years have been difficult for New Jersey residents along the Passaic River Basin. Their homes have been flooded over and over again, which makes them the most flood prone area in the entire state. Flood insurance payments and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) payments continue to roll in with each flood event, but the residents have had enough. They simply wanted out regardless of whether the damages would be paid for or not.

Governor Chris Christie signed Executive Order #23 establishing the Passaic River Basin Flood Advisory Commission in April of 2010. The group's main priority was to look at solutions to the chronic flood problems within that area. After much review, the Commission issued a report and made seventeen recommendations to the State. The first two priorities were acquisitions and elevations, respectively.

Based on the Commission's review, the Governor was able to coordinate with the New Jersey Office of Emergency Management (NJOEM) and FEMA to identify potential projects for FEMA's non-disaster grant programs. With the help of other State and Federal partners, they worked tirelessly to pinpoint properties that may be eligible for an acquisition project. They were also successful in finding a source to fund the State's required "match." Everything was beginning to fall in place.

In the meantime, Hurricane Irene had just made landfall and brought significant flooding to the east coast. New Jersey residents were not exempt from the damages. The President then signed a Major Disaster Declaration for the State of New Jersey, which allowed FEMA to set up a joint field office to provide disaster assistance to hard hit areas. Mitigation staff members were on hand.

Within the first few days of the disaster, mitigation staff members were able to coordinate closely with NJOEM in preparing projects for submission. The Governor was quickly able to prioritize projects, based off the Passaic River Basin Flood Advisory Commission's recommendations. Prior to the formal application submission, FEMA and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) were also able to pre-identify hundreds of properties that would meet eligibility standards, specifically Benefit Cost Analysis. Preliminary flood maps were also provided within a timely manner from FEMA's Risk Analysis Branch. All agencies involved were committed to not "doing things the way we have always done them." For example, instead of collecting all Letters of Intent, prioritizing, then submitting projects that can take up to 18-24 months, projects were submitted on a rolling basis at the very beginning of the disaster.

With State and Federal partners working side by side, FEMA was able to obligate \$47 million dollars to the State of New Jersey within six months of the disaster to complete 237 acquisitions and 71 elevations. The key to success in expediting this project was planning and coordination among FEMA, the State, and local communities. Each of the agencies involved played a critical role in getting the funds obligated quickly and efficiently. In short, we must have a "playbook" on the shelf, ready to use when a disaster strikes. Secondly, there must be strong commitment both before and after a disaster, from senior leadership in the State (Governor) and municipality (mayor) to engage in comprehensive planning and expedited execution of the plan. There also has to be a strong



commitment from the Federal Coordinating Officer to support mitigation operations at the very inception of disaster operations. Finally, all parties must be able to challenge the way of doing business and be open to innovative ideas to get the mission accomplished.

Results of Acquisition Project During Hurricane Irene/TS Lee

- \$28M obligated within three (3) months of the disaster
- \$19M obligated in the next three (3) months of the disaster
- 308 homes impacted – 237 acquisitions and 71 elevations