

Land Use Ordinance Protects Buildings in Estes Park

Larimer County, CO – Estes Park adopted a land use ordinance to protect Estes Valley stream and river corridors. This ordinance clearly defines the boundaries at which structures should be set back to promote, preserve, and enhance the important hydrologic, biological, ecological, aesthetic, recreational, and educational functions that stream and river corridors and their associated riparian areas and wetlands provide. Adhering to this ordinance protected many buildings in Estes Park during the September 2013 catastrophic flood event.

“For new construction, we have an ordinance which states that all buildings and accessory structures shall be set back at least 30 feet from the annual high-water mark of stream corridors, or if not readily discernible, from the defined bank of the stream,” said Will Birchfield, local floodplain administrator. “With regard to rivers, all buildings must be set back at least 50 feet from the annual high-water mark of river corridors.”

In the downtown area, all buildings and accessory structures in the Community Development (CD) district have to be set back at least 20 feet from the annual high-water mark of river corridors. Where a principal building in the CD district provides public access, the setback may be reduced to 10 feet.

Setbacks were also addressed for parking lots. Except in the CD zoning district, parking lots must be set back at least 50 feet, and in the CD district, at least 12 feet from the defined bank of the river or stream.

Located along the Big Thompson River, Estes Park, a small town and popular summer resort, received a large portion of the flash floods that wreaked havoc on the state of Colorado in September 2013.

The flood reached a height above the predicted base flood level and caused surface inundation of low-lying areas throughout the town. Other damages included high-velocity scour along Fish Creek and embankment failure along portions of the Big Thompson River, Black Canyon Creek, and the Fall River.

The town had one road entrance, Devil's Gulch (County Road 43), that eventually collapsed, virtually making Estes Park an island.

Numerous roads were closed, particularly those located along the Big Thompson River.

The town suffered loss of a major sewer line that has forced town officials to create a "no flush" zone.

As floodwaters inundated the business district, residential properties remained dry (with the exception of some minor basement and crawl space flooding).

“The majority of our damage was to infrastructure, mainly roads and bridges,” said Birchfield. “We had damage to one residential building. If the land use ordinance had not been in effect, a lot of homes would have suffered major damage.”

Buffers are vegetated land located adjacent to critical areas that are intended to protect critical areas such as river and stream corridors. Land use regulations have required buffers around wetlands and streams for many years. It's important to note, however, that they serve different functions depending on the type of critical area they are intended to protect.

For additional information, visit: <http://www.colorado.gov/cs/Satellite/TownofEstesPark/CBON/1251596047038> and www.fema.gov