



City of Ottawa Acquisition Project

Full Mitigation Best Practice Story

La Salle County, Illinois



Ottawa, IL - Located 80 miles southwest of Chicago along the Illinois and Fox Rivers, the biannual flooding of one particular floodplain area of Ottawa typically lasts three days with outside water depths anywhere from 1 to 6 feet. Although many of the occurrences may have been considered "nuisance" flooding, people living in this "flats" neighborhood had faced evacuation of their homes every few years. With losses ranging from personal property damage in basements to severe structural damage of homes and businesses, property owners with flood insurance were happy they had coverage. Flood insurance helped them maintain financial solvency.

But following unusually heavy mid-July rains in 1996, the City of Ottawa was among those included in a Federal disaster declaration covering 11 counties in northeast Illinois. Coordinated by the Illinois Emergency Management Agency (IEMA) and FEMA, this declaration brought relief to families through FEMA's Individual Assistance program and U.S. Small Business Administration loans. Through FEMA's Public Assistance program, the declaration helped Ottawa and other municipalities recoup response, cleanup and repair costs. The City estimated that its direct costs for repairs and other service expenses had exceeded \$105,000 following the 1996 flood. This amount was for a single flood, and it did not account for commercial and personal losses throughout the greater Ottawa area.

Over the years, the owners of 33 properties with National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) coverage each filed multiple claims. Many of these properties were located in the Flats, and their multiple claim distinction identified them as repetitive loss properties in this community of 18,000. With a high number of repetitive loss properties and substantial damage resulting from the 1996 flooding, Ottawa had the attention of FEMA's NFIP staff and the State NFIP Coordinator within the Illinois Department of Natural Resources/Office of Water Resources (IDNR/OWR). Under the City's floodplain ordinance, owners of substantially damaged buildings were already being required to elevate their homes or businesses, but many of these owners could not afford to meet the ordinance requirement.

When the City learned that the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) acquisition, or "buyout" funding, would be available as a result of the disaster declaration, Ottawa officials jumped at the chance to become part of an ongoing effort of FEMA and IEMA to acquire flood prone properties at pre-disaster, fair market value, from willing sellers, with FEMA paying up to 75 percent of the project cost. As the City had committed to providing 5 percent of the funding, the final 20 percent would need to be absorbed by qualifying property owners. Factoring in basic transfer costs, the participants would be getting less than 80 cents on the dollar for their properties.

Homeowners who had been unsure about participating changed their minds after the 1997 floods. It was becoming more and more clear that their properties were losing value. One homeowner related, "I have lived here all of my married life and raised my children in this house. I love my home and we have even gone to the expense to elevate it. But I just can't take it any more. I can't leave this house by boat one more time." In total, the City acquired parcels from 36 different property owners and demolished over 65 structures including single-family homes, duplexes, garages, out-buildings, and commercial buildings.

The Flats area is now the pride of Ottawa. The newly established "Fox River Park" has open play areas and public space for picnicking and fishing, not to mention boat docks and a river walk. Besides these appreciable amenities, the park has a 9-hole disc golf course, the site of a Professional Disc Golf national tournament in 2003. Thinking of it as a "recycling opportunity," the City used some of the buildings as training sites for fire, arson, and drug enforcement investigations before demolition. These training events served multiple local communities, as well as State police and fire agencies.

Of the 33 properties on the NFIP repetitive loss list, 25 have been acquired and cleared, and the flood risk of two properties has been reduced following construction of a large levee project. Although six repetitive loss structures remain, the City's floodplain mitigation efforts have so far resulted in an 82 percent reduction in FEMA-recognized repetitive loss properties.

Activity/Project Location

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

FEMA Region: **Region V**

State: **Illinois**

County: **La Salle County**

City/Community: **Ottawa**

Key Activity/Project Information

Sector: **Public**

Hazard Type: **Flooding**

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

Activity/Project Start Date: **07/1997**

Activity/Project End Date: **07/2000**

Funding Source: **Local Sources; National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP)**

Funding Recipient: **Local Government**

Funding Recipient Name: **City of Ottawa**

Activity/Project Economic Analysis

Cost: **\$3,300,000.00 (Estimated)**

Non FEMA Cost:

Activity/Project Disaster Information

Mitigation Resulted From Federal
Disaster? **Yes**

Federal Disaster #: **1129 , 07/25/1996**

Value Tested By Disaster? **No**

Repetitive Loss Property? **Unknown**

Reference URLs

Reference URL 1: **<http://www.ottawachamberillinois.com/>**

Reference URL 2: **<http://www.floodsmart.gov>**

Main Points

- Over the years, the owners of 33 properties in this community of 18,000 have each filed multiple claims.
- Thinking of it as a "recycling opportunity," the City used some of the buildings that were acquisitioned as training sites for fire, arson, and drug enforcement investigations before demolition. These training events served multiple local communities, as well as State police and fire agencies.
- The Flats area is now the pride of Ottawa.