



Sept. __ 2013
DR-4131-MN; PR
News Desk:

NEWS RELEASE

CITY DRIES OFF FROM FLOODING WITH MITIGATION

ST. PAUL, MN ó For years Austin residents faced spring and summer rains with high anxiety and crossed fingers. Located at the confluence of the Cedar River and Turtle and Dobbins creeks in southern Minnesota, Austin has waded through a string of devastating flood events.

City officials knew after the flood of 1978 they would have to plan ahead to reduce risks from future flooding. A number of events underscored their problem. Water went over the banks of Cedar River in 1983, 1993, 2000 and 2004, swamping the city. By the flood of 2004ó the cityó most severeó damages to homes and businesses from the five floods tallied \$2.6 million, a significant amount for a community of fewer than 25,000. Efforts to do something about it were already underway. With several grants, Austin began buying out homes that had been repeatedly damaged in several flood events.

In 2006, Austin applied for and received a Pre-Disaster Mitigation Competitive (PDM-C) grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). These grants provide funds to states, territories, Indian tribal governments, communities and universities for hazard mitigation planning and the implementation of mitigation projects prior to a disaster. Funding makes possible plans and projects to reduce overall risks to the population and structures, while also reducing reliance on funding from actual disaster declarations. PDM grants are awarded on a competitive basis.

Austinó use of pre-disaster funds to purchase 15 houses in the Wildwood Park neighborhood along the river and to remove sanitary sewer service to the area served as a mitigation success. During the flood in 2008, the cityó third worst, fewer homes were damaged by rising waters and backed up sewers.

Since then, Austinó flood mitigation program has remained a priority. The city has erected structural walls and berms and has acquired more than 265 houses and cleared them from floodways. The remaining open space has become part of the cityó Comprehensive Linear Park System.

óVacated land follows the Cedar River and contains trails, trail heads, basketball courts, playground systems, community gathering shelters and a dog park,ó said Steven Lang, Austinó city engineer and director of public works. óIt has a positive impact on the whole community.ó

Mitigation priorities have reaped other benefits. Austin participates in the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) and has embraced NFIP's Community Rating System (CRS) program that offers discount incentives on insurance premiums to residents of communities that adopt extra protective measures against floods.

“Austin has a Class 5 rating, netting residents a 25 percent discount on their flood insurance premiums,” Lang said.

The rating system runs downward from 10 to a rating of 1. A rating of Class 1 brings the lowest flood insurance rates. Ratings are linked to mitigation activities.

“The city has an aggressive zoning department that's very involved in the permitting process,” Lang said. The department requires new buildings to be a foot above the base flood elevation. The city recently adopted FEMA's latest flood maps, updated ordinances in support of the maps and enforces strict compliance to those ordinances.

Though Austin escaped the brunt of this summer's flooding, the city remains vigilant.

“We're planning a large scope of projects over the next four to five years,” Lang said. “There were limited impacts this summer, but our mitigation work continues.”

Perhaps Austin has not yet seen its biggest flood. If waters rise above the record 2004 levels one day, fewer residents and business owners will feel the need to hold their breath and cross fingers— thanks to the city's ongoing mitigation initiatives.

“By spending time and energy toward flood mitigation today, we can lessen the cost of disasters to our community tomorrow,” Lang said.

###

FEMA's mission is to support our citizens and first responders to ensure that as a nation we work together to build, sustain, and improve our capability to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate all hazards.

Follow FEMA online at www.twitter.com/fema, www.facebook.com/fema, and www.youtube.com/fema. Also, follow Administrator Craig Fugate's activities at www.twitter.com/craigatfema. The social media links provided are for reference only. FEMA does not endorse any non-government websites, companies or applications.