



Belhaven: Rising Above the Flood

Full Mitigation Best Practice Story

Beaufort County, North Carolina

Belhaven, NC - The first thing that usually strikes visitors who enter the small harbor town of Belhaven (population 1,900) is that many of the homes, whether trailer or mansion, are elevated high enough to protect them from floodwaters. The town did not always look like this.



As a coastal town in North Carolina, Belhaven has often been battered by severe storms and hurricanes. In the last eight years alone, it has been flooded by seven named storms and hurricanes, and absorbed tens of millions of dollars worth of damages.

The public buildings that were regularly hit included the town's elementary school, and the beloved, but low-lying, town library.

As far back as 1933, when children would be read to in the window of O'Neal's Drug Store, it was clear Belhaven needed a library. Still, it took almost two decades before a permanent library found a home on Main Street, just blocks from the picturesque Pantego Creek, which flows into the Pungo River. Since the town is located in the 100-year floodplain, the bungalow library remained in a vulnerable position for major flooding.

"From 1996 to 1998 our former library flooded six times," said branch librarian Joan Bogun. "Since we had outgrown it anyway, it only made sense to rebuild to survive future floods."

After the devastation of Hurricane Fran in 1996, Belhaven city officials were determined to take action. They started an aggressive mitigation campaign to elevate structures. They would use Federal and State grant money where they could, and private money when the grant money ran out. "Our plan was to keep everybody out of harm's way," said Town Manager Tim M. Johnson.

Federal, State and city officials worked together on two projects in the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP), which is administered by the North Carolina Division of Emergency Management (NC DEM) and funded by FEMA. The first project elevated 232 eligible residences, and the second purchased Belhaven's old elementary school with the money going towards a new school out of the 100-year flood plain. The residential elevations accelerated after Hurricane Floyd in 1999. Both projects were completed before landfall of Hurricane Isabel in September 2003.

Not everyone waited for Federal money, however. For instance, the often-flooded Belhaven public library was rebuilt and elevated through a substantial donation from a local patron, community fundraising, and a State disaster relief grant. Completed in November 2001, the new structure is large enough to hold community meetings, events and local projects. Textured pastel murals by community artists fill the children's reading section, and the radiant round stain-glass window beneath the high cathedral ceiling depicts Belhaven's relationship with its harbor. And, perhaps best of all, it is elevated above the base flood elevation.

After Hurricane Isabel passed through North Carolina, media and disaster officials flocked to Belhaven as word spread of the success of its mitigation efforts. The story in Belhaven was that the damage that did not happen.

"The elevated houses made all the difference during this storm," says City Manager Johnson.

Property owners who had elevated homes through HMGP funds experienced minimal or no flood damage from Isabel. According to a FEMA mitigation report ("Losses Avoided During Hurricane Isabel in North Carolina") that examined 182 of the elevated structures specifically, those buildings alone avoided damages that would have amounted to several million dollars.

The new library was also among the survivors. At the height of the storm, Belhaven's Main Street was under 3 feet of water, but the library's artwork and books remained above the surging waters.

And what does librarian Bogun think of Belhaven's elevated library? She says, " My new slogan is that it's high, dry and smells nice!"

Activity/Project Location

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

FEMA Region: **Region IV**

State: **North Carolina**

County: **Beaufort County**

City/Community: **Belhaven**

Key Activity/Project Information

Sector: **Public**

Hazard Type: **Flooding; Hurricane/Tropical Storm**

Activity/Project Type: **Elevation, Structural**

Activity/Project Start Date: **10/1996**

Activity/Project End Date: **08/2003**

Funding Source: **Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP); Local Sources; Private funds; State sources**

Funding Recipient: **Local Government**

Funding Recipient Name: **City of Belhaven**

Activity/Project Economic Analysis

Cost: **Amount Not Available**

Activity/Project Disaster Information

Mitigation Resulted From Federal
Disaster? **Unknown**

Value Tested By Disaster? **Yes**

Tested By Federal Disaster #: **No Federal Disaster specified**

Year First Tested: **2003**

Repetitive Loss Property? **Yes**

Reference URLs

Reference URL 1: <http://www.dem.dcc.state.nc.us/mitigation/>

Reference URL 2: <http://www.fema.gov/about/divisions/mitigation/mitigation.shtm>

Main Points

- City started an aggressive mitigation campaign to elevate structures, using Federal and State grant money, and private money when the grants ran out.
- The first project elevated 232 eligible residences, and the second purchased Belhaven's old elementary school with the money going towards a new school out of the 100-year flood plain.
- The often-flooded Belhaven public library was rebuilt and elevated through a substantial donation from a local patron, community fundraising, and a State disaster relief grant.