

Forward-Thinking Building Rules Protect Houston from Disaster

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The Houston City Council took an important step to protect its residents and their property April 4 by ensuring new construction will meet a higher standard for flood preparedness.

Beginning Sept. 1, new buildings will be required to sit 2 feet above the 0.2 percent (500-year) floodplain, replacing the previous standard of 1 foot above the 1 percent (100-year) floodplain.

“This is the type of proactive solution that will help Houston lead the way in preparing for potential crises,” said Kevin Hannes, federal coordinating officer for FEMA’s Texas recovery. “Keeping residents safe and creating resilient communities requires forward-thinking to lessen the impact of inevitable future weather events.”

A storm bringing 13 to 14 inches of rain within 24 hours would flood properties in the 1 percent floodplain; the chance of such a storm is 1 percent in any given year. A 0.2 percent storm would bring 17 to 19 inches.

Houston’s current regulation meets FEMA’s minimum requirement for participation in the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP). When Hurricane Harvey dumped 51 inches of rain in August 2017, however, hundreds of thousands of homes were flooded. The new rule would have protected 84 percent of those homes, a Houston Public Works study showed.



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Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner noted that some local business interests opposed the new ordinances because of increased construction costs, but he said the higher standards will save lives and assure business owners the city is working to protect their investment.

“Unless we take constructive steps to mitigate the risk of flooding, why would business owners want to make a significant investment inside the city of Houston?” Turner asked. “We are not going to put profit over the lives of people.”

Houston’s new ordinances also require “no-net fill” for new construction: Any soil brought to a site must be equal to the amount removed from the site. Additionally, development-expansion projects will need to follow updated rules on providing rainwater retention areas.

Houston has been a member of the NFIP since 1979, an important step for lessening the impact of catastrophic events. With more than 132,620 active flood insurance policies, Houston has over \$36 billion in combined flood coverage.

Houston plans to continue working with its federal, state and county partners to enhance the city’s safety and resilience. Turner said future initiatives may include drainage projects, bayou-widening and a third reservoir.

For more information on Hurricane Harvey and Texas recovery, visit the Hurricane Harvey disaster web page at www.fema.gov/disaster/4332, or Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/FEMAharvey>, the FEMA Region 6 Twitter account at twitter.com/FEMARegion6, or the Texas Division of Emergency Management website at <https://www.dps.texas.gov/dem/>.



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