



## Two Birds, One Stone: Village of Aberdeen, Ohio

### Full Mitigation Best Practice Story

#### *Brown County, Ohio*

**Aberdeen, OH** - Ohio River flooding is nothing new to the Village of Aberdeen and its population of 545. Before March 1997, the historic riverfront community about 50 miles east of Cincinnati had lived through five major 20th century flood events (1913, '36, '37, '59 and '96).



While past efforts had been made to reduce the community's exposure to repetitive damage, including adoption of a local floodplain ordinance in 1983, Aberdeen had an obvious "Achilles heel" in terms of repeated property damage, danger to residents and public safety forces and negative impact on the community's appearance and quality of life.

That vulnerable spot was a stretch of downtown river frontage roughly 10 blocks long by three blocks deep which slopes dramatically down from the village's main street (U.S. Route 52) toward the Ohio River. For the last 100-150 yards before the river bank, the hillside flattens into a level plain 8-10 feet below the Base Flood Elevation (100-year flood level). As a practical matter, during periods of heavy rain or when the river begins to escape its banks, this low-lying area functions as a natural drainage basin which can fill very rapidly with several feet of water.

Unfortunately from a public safety and tax expense point of view, and despite major flooding as recently as the preceding spring, in March 1997 this high-risk area was occupied by a half-dozen single family homes and 25 mobile homes - mostly occupied by low-income renters - which were sited only a foot or two above grade level.

According to current Aberdeen Mayor Billie Eitel, who took office in 2000, local safety forces and volunteers had been called out on numerous occasions prior to 1997 to rescue residents of this area from rising water and tow mobile homes to safer ground. While these humanitarian acts had saved many occupants from possible death or injury and the loss of their homes and possessions, Eitel noted that rescuing residents had also sheltered them from the natural consequences of continuing to live in a flood-prone area... and made it possible for them to return to unsafe sites after flood waters receded.

Because of the unprecedented speed with which runoff accumulated in March 1997, only a handful of mobile homes could be removed from the riverfront area before it became impassable. Virtually all of the three dozen housing units in the low-lying area were destroyed or significantly damaged by rampaging floodwaters as the Ohio surged out of its banks during the next several days.

During FEMA-assisted local recovery efforts, village officials were put in contact with the OEMA Mitigation Branch and briefed on the availability of federal hazard mitigation grants. In discussing the possibilities with area residents and developing a local HMGP proposal, it became clear to community leaders that they had a unique opportunity to "kill two birds with one stone" through a property acquisition project that would: a) eliminate most structures from the riverfront area, an area that was dangerous not only to occupants but also to public safety personnel, and for which thousands of tax dollars had already been spent and major future expenditures for flood rescue, recovery and repairs were virtually certain and b) convert the village's "front yard" along a scenic stretch of the Ohio from an unsightly jumble of substandard housing into a 1/2 mile long riverfront park that would enhance recreational opportunities for the whole community and dramatically improve the appearance of the downtown area.

While state and federal officials approved Aberdeen's grant proposal in early 1998, the village and its leaders encountered delays and difficulties in implementing the buyout project. One challenge was that rather than hire a paid project manager to handle administrative details as most participating communities did, Aberdeen chose to administer buyout procedures internally through the mayor's office, so it could count that cost as an in-kind contribution toward the required local matching amount. Another thorny issue was dealing with non-resident owners of riverfront lots and mobile homes, who had continued to derive significant rental income from those properties for many years despite non-compliance with local flood plain regulations.

"Throughout the process, the FEMA and Ohio EMA people were way more than helpful," said Eitel. "When I took office in 2000, they walked me through the unfinished paperwork we needed to complete, and helped us take the proper steps to finish getting properties appraised, negotiate terms and complete the acquisition process."

The village ultimately bought out 15 structures and eight vacant lots in the targeted area. One mobile home was relocated to a trailer park outside the flood plain.

The village worked with FEMA to help displaced renters find nearby replacement housing. All but one of the households whose residences were acquired remained in the Aberdeen community.

While a few isolated homes still remain in the mitigated area, by early 2002 Mayor Eitel proudly pointed out a new volunteer-constructed (and flood resistant) gazebo that serves as a bandstand for free summer concerts; a string of new merchant-donated riverbank park benches and a grassy expanse of new public parkland that stretches from the eastern edge of the business district to a pre-existing municipal boat dock and children's playground several blocks away. Plans were in the works to add a basketball court and horseshoe pit.

"It wasn't the easiest thing I've ever done, and anyone who takes on a mitigation project should understand that there's a substantial time commitment involved," said Eitel. "But the payoff has been a great improvement in the safety and appearance and quality of life in our community."

Asked if she would do it all again, Eitel made her position clear: "I feel lucky that we were one of the communities selected for a mitigation grant," she said. "If FEMA called up today and offered us the same opportunity, I'd jump at it."

### Activity/Project Location

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

FEMA Region: **Region V**

State: **Ohio**

County: **Brown County**

City/Community: **Aberdeen**

### Key Activity/Project Information

Sector: **Public/Private Partnership**

Hazard Type: **Flooding**

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

Activity/Project Start Date: **03/1997**

Activity/Project End Date: **01/2002**

Funding Source: **Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP)**

Funding Recipient: **Local Government**

### Activity/Project Economic Analysis

Cost: **Amount Not Available**

## Activity/Project Disaster Information

Mitigation Resulted From Federal  
Disaster? **Yes**

Federal Disaster #: **1122 , 06/24/1996**

Value Tested By Disaster? **Unknown**

Repetitive Loss Property? **Unknown**

## Reference URLs

Reference URL 1: <http://www.floodsmart.gov/>

Reference URL 2: <http://www.ema.ohio.gov/>

## Main Points

- Aberdeen had an obvious "Achilles heel" in terms of repeated property damage, danger to residents and public safety forces and negative impact on the community's appearance and quality of life.
- In discussing the possibilities with area residents and developing a local HMGP proposal, it became clear to community leaders that they had a unique opportunity to "kill two birds with one stone" through a property acquisition project.
- While a few isolated homes still remain in the mitigated area, by early 2002 Mayor Eitel proudly pointed out a new volunteer-constructed (and flood resistant) gazebo that serves as a bandstand for free summer concerts; a string of new merchant-donated riverbank park benches and a grassy expanse of new public parkland that stretches from the eastern edge of the business district to a pre-existing municipal boat dock and children's playground several blocks away.