



## Buyouts Cancel Complaints

### Full Mitigation Best Practice Story

#### *Cobb County, Georgia*



**Cobb County, GA** - Whenever it rained more than two inches, Bill Higgins' phone would ring. "My basement's flooding again! Can't you do something to help?" Unfortunately, as a water engineer for Cobb County, there wasn't much Higgins could do to help anguished residents of Leasa Court and Cynthia Court, whose homes were built in the floodplains of Little Noon-Day Creek and Sewell Mill Creek respectively. "All we could do was explain to them that their house was built before 1988, before our current floodplain ordinance," Higgins said. "Back then, you could build in the floodplain."

This year, when Hurricane Ivan dumped more than five inches of rain on Cobb County - much of it falling in as little as half an hour - Higgins' phone remained quiet. "It was a relief not to get called by those folks again," he said. What made Hurricane Ivan's heavy rain different? "Last year, we bought out 19 houses on Leasa Court and four houses on Cynthia Court, eliminating residential damage in the most severe of the chronic flooding areas in this part of the county," Higgins said. Buying out these homes proved to be the most cost-effective solution to Cobb County's continual flooding problems. Two FEMA programs helped make it possible for the County to buy the properties on Leasa Court - the Flood Mitigation Assistance (FMA) program and the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP). Staff from the Georgia Emergency Management Agency (GEMA) worked closely with Cobb County on grant application development, review, and in recommending them for FEMA funding.

"People who had lived on those properties for a long time were very glad to have the opportunity to get out," Higgins said. "They knew they weren't going to get anything out of the house. Many of them had sustained a lot of damage, and they would have to disclose it when they sold."

From the county's perspective, buying the properties was more cost effective than other measures. For the properties on Leasa and Cynthia Courts, Higgins said, "we could have carried out a capital improvement project in that area, but the cost of such a project would have been at least twice the cost of buying the homes outright."

In addition to the cost savings," he added, "It's nice to be able to regain the storage capacity of the floodplain again. There's also the benefit of re-establishing the natural vegetation and the filtering abilities of the vegetation."

Cobb County is known for being one of the more progressive counties in metro Atlanta in regard to floodplain management, and Bill Higgins is part of the reason. Higgins spearheaded several flood mitigation initiatives and has been enthusiastically backed by the Director of the Cobb County Water System, Cobb County Manager and Cobb County Board of Commissioners.

"Floodplain buyout, I think, makes a lot of sense," Higgins said. "It restores the floodplain's storage capacity, the natural flood-mitigation quality that the floodplain has."

Other ideas Higgins backs include expanding the stream buffers - widening the no-build zone as streams grow larger - and purchasing storage volume. The latter, he explained, has to do with the county paying property owners to lower the water levels in their ponds and lakes. "We get a ton of storage volume that is then available for increased flood flows from the upstream watershed."

Higgins' long-term goal is to mitigate all the major floodplains in Cobb County, thus eliminating or reducing property damage due to floods and flood-related litigation. FEMA and GEMA support Cobb County's goals by offering grants from the FMA and HMGP programs. Once FEMA funds have been used to restore floodplains to their natural conditions, they must remain public spaces and cannot be built upon again.

### Activity/Project Location

Geographical Area: **Single County (County-wide)**

FEMA Region: **Region IV**

State: **Georgia**

County: **Cobb County**

### Key Activity/Project Information

Sector: **Public**

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

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

Activity/Project Start Date: **09/2002**

Activity/Project End Date: **09/2003**

Funding Source: **Flood Mitigation Assistance (FMA); Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP)**

Funding Recipient: **Local Government**

Funding Recipient Name: **Cobb County**

### 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: **2004**

Repetitive Loss Property? **Yes**

### Reference URLs

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

Reference URL 2: <http://www.fema.gov/business/nfip/>

## Main Points

- County bought 23 properties in the floodplain.
- The buyout of repetitive loss properties in Cobb County ensures that the floodplain will not be rebuilt in the future.
- FEMA and GEMA support Cobb County's floodplain management goals by offering grants from the FMA and HMGP programs.