



FEMA

Planning is Key to Mitigation Success Achieved by Community

Bluffton, Indiana – Bluffton, an historic town set along the Wabash River, regularly pays a price for its bucolic setting. The Wabash has overflowed its banks many times since the Great Flood of 1913. The floods in 2003 and 2005 forced residents to evacuate and encouraged them to consider steps they could take to protect themselves and their property in the future. "As the waters were rising in 2003, we brought in surveyors and engineers to mark levels," said Mayor Ted Ellis. "They let us know we were right on target with our established floodplain management guidelines and our Base Flood Elevation figures, as shown on the FEMA maps."

Early in 2005, threatening floodwaters came again. This time, however, the Town was better prepared to concentrate response efforts in areas with the greatest potential for significant damage. "Through the FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, we were able to purchase properties and turn them into green space," said Jerri Lehman, Wells County Emergency Management Director. "The area is no longer a drain on resources or emotions."

Buying homes and properties, some held by families for generations, can be a challenge even when they have sustained repetitive flood damage. Regular town meetings were held to discuss mitigation options and explain how various programs would work. Once everyone agreed that a buyout was their best option, the community readily approved funding to meet the cost-share obligation of the FEMA grant.

The Town's next task was to decide which homes they would offer to purchase and remove as part of the initiative. Properties were targeted based on their position in the floodplain and grouped into four categories: owner-occupied with greater than 50 percent flood damage, not occupied by owner with greater than 50 percent flood damage, owner-occupied with less than 50 percent flood damage, and not occupied by owner with less than 50 percent flood damage. All properties in the first three categories were included in the project. A total of 25 residential structures were approved for acquisition and demolition.

To remove the structures on the selected properties, the town chose licensed contractors through their standard bidding process. "When the time came to level the homes, we gave the owners the option to attend" said Ellis. Some decided to watch, while others said, "Don't even tell me when it's going to happen. I don't want to know." It's a hard thing, the family's losing part of it's history, and the community part of its flavor."

"The buyout program worked for us on several levels," noted Ellis. "First, we didn't have to waste valuable time trying to protect an area that was going to get hit...More importantly, folks in Bluffton don't get stressed every time the rain comes. They know things are being done to ensure their safety and protect their property, and they are an important part of the process."



**Wells County,
Indiana**



Quick Facts

Sector:

Private

Cost:

\$929,623.00 (Actual)

Primary Activity/Project:

Acquisition/Buyouts

Primary Funding:

Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP)