

# Waste Not, Want Not

## Barnes County Makes the Most of Flood-Prone Properties

Norma Duppler hates to see things go to waste. She'll recycle just about anything—including houses and the land they sit on.

It's a concept that is not commonly done with as much fervor as Duppler employs. But it is one that has been extraordinarily successful for Barnes County, North Dakota, and about a dozen residents who were repeatedly getting flooded.

That's because Duppler has helped those residents move away from a river and the danger it can bring. She has been able to recycle—instead of demolishing—many of their houses. She has helped find innovative ways to reuse the oft-flooded land. And she's done it all at relatively little cost to the county.

Duppler is the Barnes County emergency manager. And since the early 1990s, when much of North Dakota began seeing yearly floods, there has been trouble in her county.

"We had a drought up until the 1990s," Duppler explained. "Then about 1992, it started raining a lot. In 1993, the rainfall amounts started to double and triple. By 1996, we'd already had four disasters in four years. Now, in 2000, the water table has risen in some places to just two feet below ground where it used to be eight to nine feet below ground."

The chronic ground saturation has been only half the battle. There have been floods, too, from the Sheyenne River—usually docile and meandering—caused by excessive snowmelts in the spring and, sometimes, by severe storms in the summer.

During those floods, the river easily found its way to the basements and occasionally the main floors of homes scattered along its banks. And the residents of those homes were not only in peril, they were losing the repeated battles to save their properties as well.

One by one, they contacted Duppler after hearing about the possibility of state/federal buyouts in high-risk areas. And the cycle of recycle was about to begin.

### Looking for Help

After the 1996 flood, Duppler turned to the State of North Dakota for help. Through its Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP), the state awarded Barnes County a grant to purchase flood-damaged houses and properties in the floodplain along the Sheyenne.

The HMGP is funded, in large part, by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) under presidential disaster declarations, and is administered by the state. The program funds projects that will reduce or prevent future disaster damages—thereby reducing the human and financial suffering wrought by repeated disasters. Up to 75 percent of project costs comes from FEMA; the remaining 25 percent must come from non-federal sources.



*Barnes County  
Emergency Manager  
Norma Duppler turns  
tragedy into triumph  
with a successful buyout  
of flood-prone  
properties.*

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*This house, four miles south of Valley City, had flooded in 1993, 1995 and 1996 until a county buyout removed it from harm's way. Photo courtesy Barnes County.*

*Now the land, restored to its natural habitat, provides a roadside respite for those just passing through.*



Normally, the project sponsor—in this case Barnes County—is required to put up some or all of that 25 percent. The state contributed 10 percent of that cost, leaving the county to fund the remaining 15 percent.

But county commissioners took a stand. They did not want to use valuable tax money to benefit so few people. Between natural disasters and a sagging farm economy, times had been tough there.

“Because of all the disasters we were having, we had incurred millions and millions of dollars in county and township damage,” Duppler said. “There was no extra money. The commissioners want to spend their tax money on roads, bridges, culverts—things that benefit everybody.”

So Duppler presented the homeowners with a proposal. Although the buyouts were voluntary, those who participated would have to give up 15 percent of the final payout on their property to cover the local share of the cost. Seven homeowners said yes. Only two said no.

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“They really didn’t have a choice,” Duppler said. “They couldn’t sell their houses because no one would buy them. They couldn’t stand to live in flooding conditions anymore. But they did benefit because they got 85 percent of their house (pre-disaster value) when most of the houses, where they were, would be worth nothing.”

### **Disaster Strikes Again**

Before many of the deals could be completed, disaster struck again in the spring of 1997 when the worst flooding in recent history hit much of the state and all of the properties slated for buyouts.

Still, most of the houses were in relatively good shape when the county bought them. And that gave Duppler another idea. Why not find a way to recycle the homes instead of just razing them to meet the state and federal requirements of clearing the property?

“These were beautiful houses and I couldn’t see destroying them,” Duppler said. “All but one of the main floors were okay. They still had good windows, closets, cupboards and carpeting. They had just had repetitive finished-basement flooding. So I offered them for sale.”

And when the county auctioned the properties, she got a buyer for every single one. The county set a minimum bid of \$1,000 each for five of the houses. The new owners also were required to relocate the houses outside of the floodplain at their own expense. The county then sold the salvage rights to the remaining two houses, which were unsuitable for moving.

The buyout effort has been a benefit all the way around, Duppler said.

“Somebody got a house that’s pretty good and was able to move it to a safe location with a new basement,” she explained. “People who were threatened before got to move someplace else. Four of those houses have been placed back in Barnes County and back on the tax rolls. We reduced the county’s cost of demolition by at least half if not more, and we’re not taking up more room in the landfill.”

The fifth house was moved to a neighboring county, Duppler said. By auctioning the properties, Barnes County could return \$53,200 in proceeds to the state for use on other HMGP projects. After that refund, the project cost totaled \$492,271. The federal share came to \$434,357 and the state paid \$57,914.

### **Putting the Land to Good Use**

Though the buyout program had so far been a success, it was about to get even better. It turns out that land in the county, even in a floodplain, has value. And not the way most people would expect.

Instead of sitting dormant, nearly all of the 23 buyout acres have been recycled into a variety of new projects—all in keeping with good floodplain management—at virtually no cost to county taxpayers.

“The land has been in demand,” Duppler said. “People would contact us right away after a buyout and tell us ‘we could use that.’”

Under the terms of HMGP funding, the county is required to maintain those acres. And, it is required to permanently deed-restrict the properties to prevent future building so that damage and repair costs are not incurred.

But the requirements don’t mean that someone else can’t use—and ultimately maintain—the resulting open space as long as the usage is proper, Duppler said. And the idea of enhancing the land in a natural way had great appeal.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) was the first to propose an alternate use for a buyout property in 1995 after the county purchased a house and 2.5 acres near a bend in the river. The NRCS wanted to restore the land to its natural environment and create a roadside respite.

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In 1996, when the county bought out a neighboring property, the NRCS requested and received that land as well to further enhance the natural-habitat project.

“They (NRCS) took out the old dike, put in this beautiful wooden fence and planted thousands of trees, restoring it to a natural area,” Duppler said. “Now it’s going to be this neat little roadside attraction where people can stop, access the river there or have a picnic. And when it floods, it will just dry out normally.”

At another buyout property, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is creating an educational site not far from one of its fish hatcheries.



“Now people get to walk there,” Duppler said. “They get to fish from there. Eventually they will have signs that explain the whole environment there. What better way to use land that’s basically worthless except for the beauty and the learning potential?”

At yet another site, the Barnes County Wildlife Club got permission to create two canoe-launching points and a small park. The property had been an unofficial park area for decades before a house was built there in the 1970s and subsequently bought out in 1997.

Two other sites, totaling about 10 acres, are leased to private individuals—one as a pasture and one as a hayfield. In both cases, Duppler said, the property is maintained at no cost to the county and the tenants are able to get some value from the land. The last buyout site, a half-acre, is all that is left for the county to maintain.

In six years, the county has been able to relocate one house and buy out nine properties that have borne the brunt of disasters. Fifteen more buyouts are planned if funding becomes available.

Duppler hopes that someday soon, the disasters in her county will stop. There have already been nine federally declared disasters there in eight years.

Until then, though, she’s sure of one thing...

For at least 10 families, they already have.