

# A River Ran Through It —



*Journey from  
Heartache to Hope*

*Few neighborhoods in Grand Forks, North Dakota, were spared during the “Flood of the Century” in April 1997. FEMA photo by Andrea Booher.*

In April 1997, the world watched as the city of Grand Forks, North Dakota, became a natural disaster war zone.

Extensive efforts to keep the raging Red River of the North at bay had failed. The city’s 52,000 residents were awakened in the middle of the night and told to leave. Water was rushing from one neighborhood to another. In the midst of it all, a fire broke out in the downtown business district, hopping from building to building while firefighters braved rising water trying to get the flames under control.

When the fury ended, 11 buildings downtown had burned and about 90 percent of the city had seriously flooded. An estimated 8,600 homes—75 percent of the total number of single-family units—were affected by the flood, city figures show. More than 1,600 of the estimated 15,000 apartments were impacted. And in the downtown, all of the 315 businesses were affected.

Stunned residents returned to the daunting task of rebuilding their lives. Some thought it hopeless and moved away, leaving their wrecked houses behind.

But it was not hopeless. Instead, a new Grand Forks continues to emerge. Faith, hard work and vision have prevailed. Lessons have been learned. And the city, once termed an “island in a prairie sea,” is poised to show the world that it is back better than ever.

“We’ve come a long way in our recovery,” said Pat Owens who, as mayor, guided the city both through the tragedy and the first three years of recovery. “A key factor was that we formed partner-

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ships among our citizens, community leaders, businesses and city, state and federal staff. It was not only important to rebuild our city, but it was important to do it in such a way that we wouldn't be so devastated from another disaster. When your city is on a river, the risk is always there."

### Building Back Better

City leaders set the tone for rebuilding almost immediately after the water receded. Under enormous pressure to make exceptions to local floodplain ordinances, city officials instead held firm and enforced local regulations that required building back with special measures to reduce future losses.

"We have a federal government in place," said Owens, "but they cannot come to our aid again and again and again if we do not take care of ourselves. We need to take control of and manage our own lives."

Since the recovery began, a new disaster-resistance philosophy has taken hold.

- ◆ Most significantly, 599 residential and 40 business properties in the floodplain were voluntarily sold to the city through a mitigation buyout program. The program removes vulnerable structures from significant flood-risk areas to prevent future damages. Of the 639 properties, about 350 residences and about a third of the businesses were adjacent to a city dike that lines the river. Because of the buyout, home and business owners have moved out of harm's way to safer areas, the flood-ravaged buildings have been demolished and the resulting green space will remain open and undeveloped forever.

Funding for the buyout came from a variety of sources. Through the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, the Federal Emergency Management Agency provided about \$12.5 million and the State of North Dakota paid about \$1.7 million. The rest of the buyouts were funded with city monies and Community Development Block Grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

- ◆ To restore flood protection for the city, an existing dike has been repaired and an interim secondary dike has been built to the level of the 1997 flood. A larger, permanent certified dike, begun in June 2000, will be built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for about \$350 million. It is scheduled to be completed by 2006.
- ◆ Amid the charred ruins of the business district, a new corporate center has been built as a commercial anchor, replacing most of the burned office space. The center, comprised of two multi-story buildings, has been floodproofed and utilities have been located both on upper floors and the roof. There is no basement.



*If the Red River (right) tops this dike again, all that will flood is open space instead of neighborhoods.*

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- ◆ Businesses are taking disaster-resistive measures as well. One local businessman, who relocated his business and built an adjoining shopping center, spent \$25,000 on fill dirt alone to raise the base of the entire shopping center 5 feet above ground level.
  - ◆ City leaders had a portion of Grand Forks' new 447,000-square-foot events center redesigned to eliminate a potential flood problem, even though the site is miles from the river and outside of the floodplain. The city was in the contract document stage for the facility when the flood occurred. Now the main event space, originally intended to be recessed 14 feet into the ground, has been elevated to ground level to reduce the impact of any possible flooding. The site could be used for a disaster staging area in the future.

Owens says she is proud of the resilience and courage of the city's residents. Recovery from this level of devastation takes time. But so many things are better now, she says, and the extra attention paid to building back in ways that will reduce or prevent future flood damage will pay off.

"We've had floods before but never like we had in '97," Owens said. "Rebuilding with disaster-resistance measures is the best advice we've ever been given and I have the greatest trust that they will work. They've worked in other communities. We feel now that the many measures we've put in place will work here too and that we can manage better if there is another flood."