

# THE FLOOD CURRENT

MARCH-APRIL 1994

## Tulsans Take Aggressive Stance on Flood Damage Mitigation

The City of Tulsa, still smarting from flooding events that prompted nine presidential disaster declarations during the 1970s and 80s, has established a flood prevention and management program that stands today as the standard for municipalities across the country. Recognizing that 10 to 15 percent of the city's area is floodplain, Tulsa officials have expended millions of dollars on flood control projects and enacted strict development regulations that pay much-needed respect to rivers and creeks -- and their floodways.

Still, Tulsa officials admit that, until recently, they underestimated the fiscal drain on the community caused by rebuilding or repairing flood-dam-

aged homes in low-lying neighborhoods year after year. The devastating 1984 flood was the turning point.

"We've learned the hard way. After the 1984 flood, the community pulled together to solve our problems," says Tulsa Mayor Susan Savage, referring to the Memorial Day flood which caused \$180 million in damage and claimed 14 lives.

In addition to establishment of comprehensive drainage plans and a sophisticated flood forecasting and alert

system, the city broke the cycle through a relatively new initiative -- purchase and removal of buildings that receive repeated flood damage.

Utilizing federal/local matching funds, Tulsa acquired and cleared some 300 homes and 228 mobile home sites from local floodplains, including the oft-flooded Mingo Creek area. Yielding to the floodplain's desire to reclaim problem neighborhoods, homes were purchased for the fair market value prior to the 1984 flood, then moved, dismantled or demolished. Resulting open spaces were transformed into

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A house prepared for removal from Tulsa's Mingo Creek area following the 1984 flood. Clearance of the neighborhood allowed the floodplain's use for parks and walking trails.

### Feds Boost Funding for Floodplain Clearance, Acquisition

Owners of flood-prone homes and businesses, as well as state and local governments, will benefit from an amended federal law that makes it easier and cheaper to move citizens from flood-prone areas and provide compensation to affected parties.

The Hazard Mitigation and Relocation Assistance Act of 1993, signed into law by President Clinton in December, amends Section 404 of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act and substantially modifies FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP). The law increases from 50 to 75 percent the federal government's share in buy-outs of "repetitive loss" structures, or those which receive repeated flood damage. The original law was predicated on the fact that money spent to repair or rebuild flood-damaged buildings -- many of which have been flooded before and would likely be flooded again in the near future -- often exceeds the cost of those structures.

Prompted in part by recent flooding in the Midwest, the retroactive amendment is applicable to damages incurred during all presidentially declared disasters after June 10, 1993.

The most obvious benefit to states and communities is the 50 percent reduction in funds required to match federal HMGP dollars while home and business owners will have increased flexibility in deciding whether or not to relocate from flood-prone areas. In turn, because fewer citizens will reside in floodplain areas, the law will eventually reduce federal flood insurance outlays to policy holders.

In general, the Stafford Act amendment seeks to strengthen the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) through improved compliance measures and increased incentives for community floodplain management and flood loss mitigation.

For more information on the HMGP, call 817/898-5124.

## Get Ready for Floods

March marks the unofficial beginning of the state's flood season. The OWRB offers these tips to protect your family, home and property from flood damage:

**Don't walk or drive through floodwaters.** Currents can be deceptive; six inches of moving water can knock you off your feet. Don't drive around road barriers; the road or bridge may be washed out. More people drown in their cars than anywhere else.

**Stay away from power lines and electrical wires.** The number two flood killer (after drowning) is electrocution. Report downed power lines to your utility company or emergency management office.

**Be alert for gas leaks.** Don't smoke or use candles, lanterns or open flames unless you know the gas has been turned off and the area has been ventilated. Use a flashlight to inspect for damage.

**Clean everything that got wet -- When in doubt, throw it out!** Floodwaters often pick up sewage and chemicals from roads, farms, factories and storage buildings. Spoiled food and flooded perishables are health hazards.

**Be prepared for a rough time.** Flood recovery is stressful and exhausting. The impact a disaster has on you and your family may persist for a long time.

**Purchase flood insurance.** It is estimated that eight to 11 million households in the nation's flood hazard areas are currently uninsured. If you live in a flood-prone area and don't possess flood insurance, contact your local independent agent.

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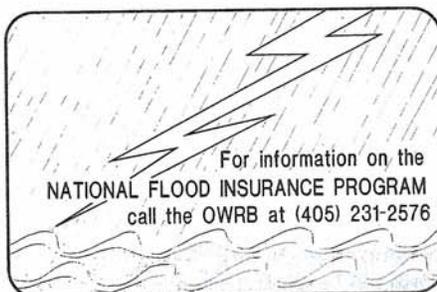
public parks and other recreational areas less susceptible to damage.

In all, the City of Tulsa has cleared 875 floodplain properties since the 1970s. Although federal funds under the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) have been available to assist in the purchase of these flood-prone structures, the city has recently elected to avoid the hassles and time constraints often associated with federal grant assistance. Instead, local officials have taken the initiative and obtained much of the necessary funding on their own -- an increasingly attractive option for larger municipalities with substantial tax bases. In 1991, Tulsa citizens approved a \$600,000 sales tax package solely dedicated to establishment of a floodplain clearance program. In fact, over the last decade, Tulsans have approved over \$100 million for flood control capital projects. The city also collects \$8 million per year for management of its stormwater control system through a utility fee.

Although future flooding problems cannot be completely avoided, the city's unrivaled devotion to floodplain management will lessen the impact of those disasters, Savage says. "In-

evitably, Tulsa will flood again, but we are certain that flooding will be less frequent and damages will be reduced because of the stormwater programs that Tulsa has developed... by drawing together and making a hard-willed commitment to progress."

In 1992, FEMA recognized Tulsa with its Outstanding Public Service Award for "significant contributions and distinguished leadership" in national floodplain management. □



### Flood Month Declared

To make citizens aware of flooding problems and solutions, Governor David Walters has again designated March as "Flood Awareness Month" in Oklahoma.

"The spring flood season is one of the most dangerous times of the year," said Patty Eaton, OWRB executive director.

"The Governor's past proclamations have been of tremendous help to us in educating the public on flood safety and floodplain management and in spreading the word about the availability of affordable flood insurance."

Of the 32 presidentially declared disasters in the state since 1955, 25 have involved flooding.

As part of Flood Awareness Month, the OWRB and FEMA are sponsoring free flood insurance/floodplain management workshops throughout the state. The scheduled dates and locations are March 22, Okmulgee; March 23, Ponca City; March 24, Burns Flat; and March 25, Ardmore. Federal and state officials will be on-hand to review new regulations and update city and county floodplain administrators on program requirements.

For more information or to register, call the OWRB at 405/231-2576. □

### National Floodplain Managers to Meet in Tulsa May 13-18

The Adams Mark Hotel in Tulsa will host the 1994 meeting of the Association of State Floodplain Managers (ASFPM) May 8 through May 13. The theme of the eighteenth annual conference is "Nania," a Native American word meaning "all together."

Federal agency representatives will discuss the future of the National Flood Insurance Program and last year's flooding in the midwest. Activities include field trips to Tulsa floodplain acquisition/relocation sites, a golf tournament, barbecue and canoe float on the Illinois River. Special room rates are available for conference guests.

For more information or to register, contact Jack Page, ASFPM Conference Director, at 605 City Hall, Tulsa, OK 74103, 918/596-1846.

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