

FLOODING IN DOWNINGTOWN



DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT By Barry Cassidy

For the past few months, I have been working with a committee in my hometown of Downingtown concerning flooding. I sent out a mailing asking interested people to form a committee. About ten people are involved, and each has a different interest in the process.

One Committee worked on mitigation and was eventually merged with the Borough of Downingtown Flood Committee to have one mitigation committee. Community members understand and know the conditions on the ground during a flood and have a voice at the table, which is how it is supposed to work.

The other Committee devoted its efforts to the dam system. The county mitigation plan outlines that the dams above Downingtown are dangerous. However, when we moved further into the discussions about the dams being dangerous, it was not the dams that are in existence but the one that is now missing.

As part of a wetlands mitigation project on Route 322 widening near Concordville, the historic Thomas Moore Dam with roots to origins of Downingtown was to be breached, and the Brandywine Creek left to the natural habitat to improve fish migration. Historically the dam diverted water into a historic mill race that was an integral part of the paper industry industrial operation.

The mill race was no longer active when the dam was breached and halted water diversion to Kardon Park. Portions of the land now known as Kardon Park were used for quarrying limestone. Limestone is the bedrock of most of Downingtown and the rest of the valley. Before a central landfill, a portion of the land was used as

the Borough's 'dump.' Later, there were several paper companies in the Borough, and with the manufacture of paper, there was a dangerous byproduct known as paper slag. This mix included several hazardous chemicals. Illegally, the paper companies would pour slag into the open quarry pits.

I am familiar with the property because, in my Downingtown professional work, I was once going to place 200,000 square feet of office space and build a community center. I switched jobs and went to the City of Philadelphia to work after securing three, one-million-dollar grants for the site. It appears that now the site should be used for water storage since the PA Supreme Court ruled that a later attempt to put housing there was unconstitutional. It must stay park land!

It appeared to me that the goals of the dam committee became a project for the mitigation committee. It is good and bad to propose this project. The good is that there is a rare confluence of dollars available to do the project. The bad news is that it will be painful for some to go through the process. But, unfortunately, stuff is what it is sometimes.

The third Committee is just getting underway, and that is the readiness and recovery committee. This Committee will work with the people in the wider area of 19335, not just the Borough.

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The Committee will address the gap in knowledge concerning the recovery funding and how to prevent future expansion of the 100-year flood zone.

Current disaster recovery models are often planned, executed, and staffed by individuals without specific knowledge of the most marginalized populations in a disaster area. At the same time, communities are often undervalued or ignored in favor of one-size-fits-all disaster strategies.

Recovery efforts must be led by community-based nonprofits located in the communities they serve. These organizations are already connected to survivors and are naturally situated to lead. Funding would be provided to build the capacity of nonprofits to assist national and neighborhood-level organizations in taking on more responsibility to assist one another; share information; reinforce opinions on recovery strategies throughout the disaster recovery process; allow state and local government officials to learn about community needs; disseminate supplies and information; design recovery and mitigation strategies concerning flood map revisions as well as integrate with municipal disaster response to maximize the benefits of both.

There are gaps in the one size fits all strategy for fairness to marginalized communities. For example, in Downingtown, much of the low-income and minority housing is located on the flood plain, and they lose everything every time there is a flood. They move. The next group lives there a while and then gets flooded and loses everything. They move. The next group moves in and...

When the flood maps are revised, few property owners know if they do not have mortgages. You are usually elderly on a fixed income if you don't have a mortgage. When dealing with being flooded, there is not enough understanding to get through the process.

There needs to be knowledgeable people who can assist the people who were flooded, as citizens need to know what they can do on their property to stop flooding by flood-proofing the house, raising elevation around the house, or creating earthen berms in areas that buffer between the flood plain and the house. And most importantly, to survey the unmet needs from IDA and help people address those needs.

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