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FLOOD RELIEF IN DOWNINGTOWN

DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

By Barry Cassidy



Recently I was asked to help with the flood relief effort in Downingtown. As in many cases, I am helping at no cost. Unfortunately, the Borough of Downingtown is up against it with the flooding this year. There have been two floods, and the lower-income areas that have typically been located in flood plains and industrial areas were hit hard.

The Borough Building was flooded and the flood mitigation plan was destroyed. My mission was to expedite the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA) buyout program.

I guess you could argue displacement, but the people are already displaced. No one lives in these properties because there was seven feet of water, and now the houses are pretty much a gut rehab. But the process takes a while, and soon people will live there again.

I was given the assignment to concentrate on one block. It looks like I will be able to get everyone involved and maybe take out 18 rental units. The program is interesting. It is a voluntary program where people say they have had enough. The buyout process is the thought process with many owners as they had two floods in three months.

The process goes like this.

There are three forms. They are the application, proof of citizenship, and hazardous waste form. They are not overwhelming hard to fill out, but I handed out the forms for the past two Saturdays and got some cooperation. I conducted 8 AM to noon sessions in the firehouse, and they were well attended. My wife helped me, and we talked to everyone.

Once you fill out the form, it goes to Pennsylvania Emergency Management. They assess and weigh the forms for one year and render you eligible or ineligible for the program. An acceptance into the program will trigger an appraisal. The appraisal is a pre-flood value for the structure.

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DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

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The program will then offer the owner the pre-flood value based upon an appraisal, and if you accept, they close on the property in two years. Of course, you can drop out at any time.

At first, you think that the time period associated with the program is long, and the flood area can appreciate. However, there is also the fact that the SEPTA train station is moving right next to the area. It will be within walking distance from the station and have the appreciation outlined in the various reports that SEPTA issues, including *SEPTA, Drives the Economy*. There is also the fact that houses in the Downingtown Borough are fast becoming one of the all-time hot housing markets.

The Downingtown School District is a winner. Many potential renters want to have a chance at the Downingtown STEM Academy, which seems to be a winner. However, the fact remains that all the price increases and all the good educational opportunities are offset by five feet of water in your living room.

A woman was telling me how she helped the people on the 100 block of Jefferson Street clean out their apartments, and all their items like photos, clothes, furniture, and the like were destroyed and

just dumped in a dumpster. She said it was heartbreaking.

Since I was asked to lead the effort, I proposed a funding plan and direction for a scope of work for a potential new mitigation effort. That was rejected, so I thought I would concentrate my efforts on the buyouts and stay with that program for three years until the residents were satisfied with the process. There is no need for someone like me to get in the way of other ways of thinking about the project ... Although it is my profession, I am a volunteer.

The part that distressed me the most while reading the emergency management plan was the statements concerning the dams located north of Downingtown. The dams were subject to some questions. There could be a disaster and real emergency for everyone if one of those dams breaks and sends a wall of water to cover the entire town. People would be throwing away my most valuable player trophy from Ford's Clara Barton Little League, which resides on the bed table next to where I sleep as it is my most valued possession.

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