



Floodplain Project Brings Community Together

Full Mitigation Best Practice Story

Menard County, Illinois



Petersburg, IL - On a hot day in late June of 2002, there was a flurry of activity in the floodplain of the Sangamon River in Petersburg, Illinois. It wasn't flood fighting this time. About 40 people, from high school freshmen to senior members of the community, gathered to connect brightly colored pieces into play equipment for a new pre-school playground in a shady spot where flood-prone buildings once stood.

That afternoon was a culmination of years of dedicated work. First, 30 flood-damaged structures were acquired and removed from the floodplain. Then the PORTA High School Community Problem Solvers (CmPS) spent four years raising funds and community support for the re-use project. Using the techniques learned from the Problem Solvers organization, the group developed and implemented plans for an approved re-use of City-owned land purchased in the buyout program, obtaining high praise from IEMA and IDNR for the group's creativity, initiative and interaction of the whole community of Petersburg.

Just a few miles from where Abraham Lincoln spent his early adult years, the Sangamon River has repeatedly flooded the City of Petersburg. Homes in the older section of town nearest the river sustained damage and declining property values from flooding in 1979, 1981, 1983, 1990, 1993, and 1994. After the flood of 1994 in which one person died, FEMA and IEMA authorized the use of Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) funds for a buyout of floodprone properties in Petersburg. A total of 43 units were acquired and the structures removed at a project cost of \$1,124,589, with FEMA HMGP covering \$818,252 and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources/Office of Water Resources (IDNR/OWR) contributing \$305,201 and the city paying \$1,135.

The re-use of vacated land from acquisition projects must follow strict guidelines in abiding by deed restriction language. Basically, no new structures can be introduced. The privately owned floodplain property purchased in an HMGP acquisition program becomes public property that the sponsoring jurisdiction must maintain. By law, the land must remain in open space. The community cannot sell it to private individuals, nor develop it.

"So many communities who participate in buyouts are locked into the idea that open space means just green grass," said Ron Davis, IEMA Hazard Mitigation Specialist. "In Petersburg, the kids started thinking about other options and took it upon themselves to make it into something else."

Two needs of the community were addressed with the plan developed by CmPS. Small children in the area of town that included the buyout property did not have a safe place to play. In addition, the acquired property would become a valued part of the community, rather than a large expanse of grass to mow.

Throughout the process of brainstorming for ideas on how to re-use the vacated lots, the group came up with options that would be appropriate for the floodplain. They eventually decided on a flower garden and playground.

The group raised \$16,000 through numerous fundraising activities, including the "Decorate an Abe" contest and auction that involved businesses in town decorating a cutout of the area's historic figure. They delivered presentations in Springfield, Chicago, and Charlotte, North Carolina, for the annual meeting of the Association of State Floodplain Managers (ASFPM). They received a \$50,000 grant from the State of Illinois, and Floodplain Managers from around the nation donated over \$1,000 to their project. The \$67,000 in grants and fundraising covered the cost of picnic tables, grills, benches, playground equipment, and a fountain and decorative brick path for the garden.

In the spring of 2002, the CmPS group's resolve was tested in a number of ways. On May 15, two feet of floodwaters covered the flower garden they had planted in the area where houses once stood. They witnessed firsthand why restrictions are placed on what can be developed in a floodplain. But with the help of Ron Davis and Paul Osman, Local Floodplain Management Programs Manager, the group had planned well. By June the water had receded, the flowers were growing and the kids were back in the park, along with Rotary Club members, parents and church groups to build the playground for which they had worked long and hard.

Also topping the list of accomplishments that June was the PORTA CmPS project that was developed to educate others about flooding and utilizing flood plain property won the Grand Championship at the 2002 International Community Problem Solvers competition.

Activity/Project Location

Geographical Area: **Single County in a State**

FEMA Region: **Region V**

State: **Illinois**

County: **Menard County**

Key Activity/Project Information

Sector: **Private**

Hazard Type: **Flooding**

Activity/Project Type: **Acquisition/Buyouts; Floodplain Management**

Activity/Project Start Date: **01/1995**

Activity/Project End Date: **01/2002**

Funding Source: **Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP)**

Activity/Project Economic Analysis

Cost: **\$134,000.00 (Estimated)**

Activity/Project Disaster Information

Mitigation Resulted From Federal
Disaster? **Yes**

Federal Disaster #: **997 , 07/09/1993**

Value Tested By Disaster? **Yes**

Tested By Federal Disaster #: **No Federal Disaster specified**

Year First Tested: **2002**

Repetitive Loss Property? **Yes**

Reference URLs

Reference URL 1: <http://www.floodsmart.gov/>

Reference URL 2: <http://www.state.il.us/iema/>

Main Points

- Just a few miles from where Abraham Lincoln spent his early adult years, the Sangamon River has repeatedly flooded the City of Petersburg.
- Throughout the process of brainstorming for ideas on how to re-use the vacated lots, the group came up with options that would be appropriate for the floodplain. They eventually decided on a flower garden and playground.
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Flower garden planted by the PORTA CmPS group in buyout area



Creatively dressed Abraham Lincoln cutouts at "Decorate an Abe" auction