

New Flood Plain Management Ordinance Gives Citizens and City Proper Tools

At a special City Council Session on February 7, 2008, the Vernonia City Council voted to accept the new Draft Flood Hazard Study Map proposed by the Army Corp of Engineers which establishes new flood zone areas. The Council also adopted Ordinance 851, the Flood Plain Management Ordinance, which repealed six previous ordinances and is designed to promote public health, safety and general welfare for Vernonia Citizens. Council approved the Ordinance after a hearing held by the City Planning Commission.

The Ordinance is intended to minimize losses from flood conditions by ensuring that occupants in the special flood hazard zone assume responsibility for any alterations to their property by obtaining Flood Development Permits and by providing tools for potential buyers to determine if properties are in the special flood hazard zone. The ordinance brings the city into compliance with all state and federal guidelines. It is especially pertinent because it allows the city to continue to participate in the National Flood Insurance program which is intended to provide affordable rates for residents in areas prone to flooding.

"The City was supposed to have been enforcing this ordinance since 1988 when we joined the National Insurance Program," said City Planning Commissioner Heather Lewis who was instrumental in creating the new ordinance. "But because of a misunderstanding between the city and FEMA about the language in the ordinance and the way it was to be interpreted, it wasn't. Because our previous building permit process didn't meet standards, FEMA graciously agreed to work with us to develop a more efficient application and help us get caught up. They are allowing us to move forward from this point and be considered in compliance."

The Ordinance also provides for the determination by the City of Vernonia of Substantial Damage. Substantially Damaged properties are properties that have been damaged to more than fifty percent of the pre-flood value of the structure. "Substantial Damage will have a direct bearing on whether home owners will be required to elevate their homes," said Lewis. "There are funds available to help with compliance. Each case is going to be very different. We are really encouraging people to come in and get assistance with this determination at the Flood Recovery Center. They need to look at each specific situation to help determine what will be best for each property owner."

The ordinance will monitor the impact of development in the flood plain by requiring permits for almost any development in the flood zone. The new maps and ordinance have created a new Flood Management Area which encompasses the previous designations of "flood way", "100 year zone", "500 year zone". "Now everyone within the Flood Management Area needs a Flood Zone Development Permit. This will make it much easier to be in compliance," said Commissioner Lewis.

The updated map is based on new datum that has provided a new mean sea level measurement; it is approximately three and a half feet higher (depending on location) than the one from 1929 which was what the previous flood map was based on. "The new map is based on this new mean level and then also takes into account the new high water levels of this flood."

Lewis went on to explain what the new ordinance will accomplish. "This cleans up what was not a very user-friendly process. This puts all the information in one place. People used to get very different answers to similar questions about development. It wasn't the staff's fault; it was the fault of the document that was in place. This will seem like a change in the way the city is doing business at first, but what it does is clarify a lot of issues."

"This is going to be a different way to gather accurate information. The end result will be no adverse impact on the flood plain," continued Lewis. "It may be awkward at first because it wasn't being enforced before, but eventually it will be seamless."

Lewis concluded by talking about the resources that are available to help people with rebuilding. "There are so many resources available. The Flood Recovery team has secured drywall and other building supplies. We have donated labor working here in the community from Christian Aid Ministries. Habitat for Humanity and other aid groups are considering coming to help. I really encourage people to investigate all options before deciding to tear down their home and rebuild. I really think the Flood Recovery people can save them a lot of money by helping them consider all options and alternatives."

From Relief to Recovery: Columbia County Flood Relief In Transition

By Scott Laird

Columbia County Flood Relief is going through some changes. For all intents and purposes the mission and focus of the group is still the same- getting flood victims resources so they can return to their homes. But the methods and actual work that Flood Relief is doing on a daily basis has changed somewhat.

"To summarize what's changed - we have moved from giving out clothing to putting together resources to make things happen," said Jim Tierney who is directing flood relief for Columbia County. "And there is a lot that needs to happen."

Columbia County Flood Relief (CCFR) is working now to identify potential funding sources and find creative and flexible ways to match those sources with the needs of the communities and victims. "We have found through the initial information gathering that we did as the Unmet Needs Committee that only about a quarter of flood victims had flood insurance," said Tierney. "And for many situations the flood insurance or FEMA money is inadequate, so we have a huge pool of people who are looking for our assistance."

In addition to locating funding sources, CCFR is finding itself playing many roles. They are helping the city and county understand and meet their obligation to make the determination whether a property has been "substantially damaged." They are locating volunteer labor and securing building materials to help ease the burden of repairs for those property owners who lack resources. The CCFR staff members are the case managers who work with each property owner, establishing relationships, giving advice, and matching needs with resources. They must establish policy and build and design a program structure that meets state and federal requirements as well as the needs of hundreds of local residents. And they are helping to guide the city and county to establish policy and direct staff as to how to enact that policy.

"This has been like starting three or four new businesses, all at the same time," said Dan Brown, who has assumed a lead role in flood recovery for the community, "except usually you take time to build a plan before starting a business. When we opened our doors we had already been in business for two days with no real plan in place and almost no trained employees. I don't think people realize how difficult this process is."

Jim Tierney stressed the complicated nature of putting so many recovery projects into action. "Every project has variables. When we are trying to put someone's home back together, it depends on whether they had insurance, got help from FEMA, or if they were a business owner. It depends on what kind of experience they have - can they do any of the construction themselves, do they have skills that are helpful, do they know how to manage a home repair project themselves? A lot of people we see don't even know how to start into something like this [by] themselves."

Another huge issue is putting this all together with limited and varying funding sources. "Different foundations, charities and government agencies have different interpretations and rules," said Tierney. "We have to wade through a lot of red tape and be really creative. We have to be able to present our data and show how much work we think we can do and how much it will cost. And a lot of times the funder's requirements and our needs don't match up. So it's a grueling process just to get funding for what we need to do."

"Our goal," said Tierney, "is to keep as many people in this community as possible. We are trying to find any way we can to help people get what they need. It is important to this community, and it is vital to our local government. Whenever someone leaves because they can't repair their home, it reduces our tax base, and if they had children in the school district, it affects the schools' funding. This recovery effort is very important to the health and welfare of this community. So we are doing everything we can."

Tierney reiterated that recovery is going to take time, in some cases a long time. "The people that had insurance or got adequate help from FEMA are the easy ones. The people who have slipped through those cracks are more challenging. We have months of work ahead of us getting people through an application process, finding funding, hiring contractors, and administering the process. Flood Recovery is a very complicated job."

Columbia County Flood Relief continues to encourage those in need of assistance to come into the relief center and meet with a case worker. You can also schedule an appointment to meet with Dan Brown to discuss the "substantial damage" process or ask other flood recovery questions.

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