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Tuesday, Aug 19, 2003

 Posted on Mon,
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City's response to flood reviewed Government officials and others looking at ways to improve.

 By **Cindy Larson**
 of **The News-Sentinel**

Even the best-laid plans can go awry. That's never more apparent than in a flood, when despite all human efforts, a river's going to go where a river wants to go.

"Mother Nature's an unfaithful companion," said Greg Meszaros, director of Public Works and City Utilities.

Although Fort Wayne can't control the forces that conspired to create the Flood of July 2003 - precipitation, ground saturation and river levels - it does have a detailed plan to protect lives and mitigate flooding.

In the aftermath, officials and flood fighters are reviewing the city's response and looking at ways to modify and fine-tune what steps it will take during the next 100-year flood.

The plan

The community has about 50 levee patrols assigned to specific areas susceptible to flooding, said Kim Schieferstein, the city's flood control coordinator.

In addition, four field supervisors oversee operations, two on the north and two on the south sides of town. When flooding is imminent, the mayor declares a state of emergency and opens the emergency operations center, which is staffed by city employees who field calls, coordinate efforts and dispatch sandbags, pumps and equipment.

Each levee patrol carries a packet of information specific to its assigned area. Maps show elevations, sewer lines, manhole locations, and where sandbags and temporary levees should go, among other steps. Additionally, the packet contains field practices for flood-fighting, such as how to build a sandbag levee and how to prevent back flow in sewer lines.

The last three years, Schieferstein has put flood engineers through worst-case scenario mock floods to practice and fine-tune flood-fighting techniques.

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A unique situation

Although some factors remain stable, such as levee locations, a number of variables make each flood unique. "The topography stays the same and the flow of water is fairly predictable, but what's not is how high the river goes," Meszaros said.

The EOC conveys expected crest information to levee patrols. In the July flood, those predictions changed daily.

"We've never seen the St. Marys this high," said Bob Kennedy, the city's associate director of Public Works. "We've never had (just) one river flood."

Schieferstein said the National Weather Service people apologized for repeatedly changing crest predictions - a necessity because the rain just kept coming.

Crest information is crucial, because if it's off even a foot or two, it could mean sandbags are put in the wrong spot.

The St. Marys River presented another problem: It has the city's highest concentration of combined sanitary and stormwater sewers. The flooded river and the combined sewers, overburdened by days of rain, resulted in backups and flooding both in homes and in streets.

Many areas that flooded last month have flooded before, and the city had a plan in place for them. But one flooded area surprised everybody: the Woodhurst neighborhood, situated between the St. Marys River and Fairfield Avenue. Several houses in that neighborhood flooded from a combination of St. Marys water and sewer backups. Ironically, homes closer to the river, such as those on Century Court, stayed dry while others a few blocks away flooded because they sit at a lower elevation, Meszaros said.

Homes at an elevation of 765 feet above sea level largely were spared from flooding. "Some areas of Woodhurst were down in the 750s," Kennedy said. "No sandbag dike can . . . sustain that water."

Because the flood was concentrated south, the city was able to borrow many flood fighters normally stationed north.

"Our strengths were community spirit and our senior staff," Meszaros said.

City officials have said before they concentrated efforts on areas where they could do some good, such as the Belle Vista neighborhood, because some flooding was simply out of their control. But that's no consolation for those who were expecting the city to protect their homes, and it's a tough and delicate job for city employees who have to tell them nothing more can be done, Meszaros said.

Areas for improvement

At debriefing meetings, the city flood fighters are reviewing the last flood and already thinking ahead to the next one. "We need to be working hard to increase our predictive abilities," Meszaros said. The city already has taken a step in that direction by putting a river level gauge on the St. Marys at the Main Street bridge.

And the gauge on the St. Marys south by Muldoon Road could become a National Weather Service forecasting site, said Cathy Robb, the city's flood maintenance supervisor. That would allow the weather service to predict

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crests there, instead of in Decatur as it does now.

The city also is considering ways to fill and mobilize sandbags faster. Schieferstein has been looking at sandbag loading machines. One idea is to store ready-to-go sandbags in a semitrailer that can be towed to wherever it's needed.

And the city is looking at storing about 25,000 sandbags that would be used exclusively for the area of Eastbrook and Westbrook drives, which floods frequently during heavy rains because of the Spy Run Creek that meanders through it.

Also, the city and the Maumee River Basin Commission will study the Spy Run Creek watershed.

Solutions

Other solutions could take years, maybe decades. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which built a \$50 million diking system for the city's three rivers after the flood of 1982, is studying what happened on the St. Marys. But the diking project, designed to prevent flooding in and near downtown Fort Wayne, wasn't completed until 2001.

Mitigating St. Marys flooding could involve changes to the river upstream, Meszaros said. "Maybe you don't fix the problem where it floods," he said, suggesting options such as a regional detention facility upstream or river widening.

He said any solution will involve the "search for society's preference."

And individual flood mitigation efforts likely will involve a mixed bag of solutions. Some homeowners, who already have expressed an interest, could be offered buyouts; others could choose to flood-proof.

Schieferstein could start a public outreach program to educate homeowners in flood-prone areas, but she acknowledged after a few years go by without a flood, residents tend to become complacent.

The city doesn't, however, Meszaros said. "We have a department that (sees to it) that knowledge endures."



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