

## Chapter 9. Public Information

### 9.1. Public Information Program Strategy

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A public information program strategy is a document that receives CRS credit. It is a review of local conditions, local public information needs, and a recommended action plan of activities. A strategy consists of the following parts.

- The local flood hazard.
- The property protection measures appropriate for a specific hazard.
- Flood safety measures appropriate for the local situation.
- The public information activities currently being implemented within the community including those by non-government agencies.
- Goals for the community's public information program

**CRS credit:** The Community Rating System provides 100 points for a public information program strategy. Although not discussed before the exercises, the CRS provides the most credit for direct mailings to floodplain residents. Credit also favors newsletters, website and libraries. Fewer points are given for other media, such as presentations at meetings and booths at shopping malls because they reach fewer people.

Successful hazard mitigation program involves both the public and private sectors. Public information activities advise property owners, renters, businesses, and local officials about hazards and ways to protect people and property from these hazards. These activities can motivate people to take the steps necessary to protect themselves and others.

This chapter starts with activities that reach out to people and tell them to be advised of the hazard and some of the things they can do. It then covers additional sources of information for those who want to learn more.

### 9.2. Outreach Projects

Technical assistance and library resources are not of much use if no one knows they exist. An outreach project can remedy this. Sending notices to property owners can help introduce the idea of property protection and identify sources of assistance.

Outreach projects are the first step in the process of orienting property owners to property protection and assisting them in designing and implementing a project. They are designed to encourage people to seek out more information in order to take steps to protect themselves and their properties.

**Direct mailings:** The most effective types of outreach projects are mailed or distributed to everyone in the community or, in the case of floods, to floodplain property owners.

Research has proven that outreach projects work. However, awareness of the hazard is not enough; people need to be told what they can do about the hazard, so projects should include information on safety, health and property protection measures. Research has also shown that a properly run local information program is more effective than national advertising or publicity campaigns. Therefore, outreach projects should be locally designed and tailored to meet local conditions.

**News media:** Local newspapers can be strong allies in efforts to inform the public. Press releases and story ideas may be all that's needed to whet their interest. After a tornado in another community, people and the media become interested in their tornado hazard and how to protect themselves and their property. Local radio stations and cable TV channels can also help. These media offer interview formats and cable may be willing to broadcast videos on the hazards.

**Other approaches:** Examples of other approaches include:

Presentations at meetings of neighborhood, civic or business groups, Displays in public buildings. Signs in parks, along trails and on waterfronts that explain the natural features (such as the river) and their relation to hazards (such as floods), Brochures available in municipal buildings and libraries, and Special meetings such as flood proofing open houses.

**Local implementation:** Jersey County uses the tax parcel mailer to contact the flood property owners. We also use the local papers and radio stations to keep people informed.

### **9.3. Real Estate Disclosure**

Many times after a flood or other natural disaster, people say they would have taken steps to protect themselves if only they had known they had purchased a property exposed to a hazard. Three regulations, one federal and two state, require that a potential buyer of a parcel be told of their exposure to a hazard.

*Federal law:* Federally regulated lending institutions must advise applicants for a mortgage or other loan that is to be secured by an insurable building that the property is in a floodplain as shown on the Flood Insurance Rate Map.

Flood insurance is required for buildings located within the base floodplain if the mortgage or loan is federally insured. However, because this requirement has to be met only 10 days before closing, often the applicant is already committed to purchasing the property when he or she first learns of the flood hazard.

*Residential Real Property Disclosure Act:* This law requires a seller to tell a potential buyer:

- If the seller is aware of any flooding or basement leakage problem
- If the property is located in a floodplain or if the seller has flood insurance

- If the seller is aware of a radon problem
- If the seller is aware of any mine subsidence or earth stability defects on the premises
- If the seller is aware of any structural defects



This State law is not wholly reliable because the seller must be aware of a problem and willing to state it on the disclosure form. Due to the sporadic occurrence of flood events, a property owner may legitimately not be aware of potential flooding problems with a property being sold or purchased. Practices by local real estate boards can overcome the deficiencies of these laws and advise newcomers about the hazard earlier. They may also encourage disclosure of past flooding or sewer problems, regardless of whether the property is in a mapped floodplain.



**Local implementation:** Jersey County has used work shops to educate bankers, realtors about flood plain regulations.

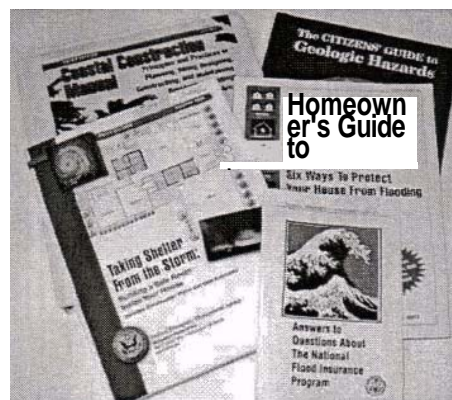


**CRS credit:** Communities would receive 10 points for the two state laws. Up to 46 more points are available if real estate agents implemented a program that checked the FIRMs before a property was listed and provided the flood hazard information to house hunters. Ten points would be provided if local real estate agents gave out brochures that advised people to check out a property's hazards before they commit to a purchase.

### 9.3.1. Library

The community library is an obvious place for residents to seek information on hazards, hazard protection, and protecting natural resources. Books and pamphlets on hazard mitigation can be given to libraries, many of them obtained free from state and federal agencies. Libraries also have their own public information campaigns with displays, lectures, and other projects, which can augment the activities of the local government.

**There are many hazard protection references that can be put in libraries**





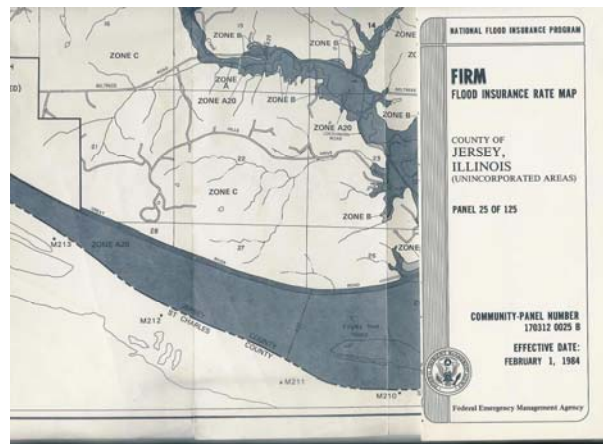
**Local implementation:** The Jersey County Library has a variety of references on natural hazards. The CRS checks our floodplain reference section on an annual basis and Jersey County is working on a multi county web site with SIU and Lewis & Clark Community College.

**CRS credit:** The Community Rating System provides up to 30 points for having a variety of flood references in the local public library and up to 36 more for similar material on municipal web sites.

#### 9.4. Technical Assistance

**Hazard information:** Many benefits stem from providing map information to inquirers. Residents and business owners that are aware of the potential hazards can take steps to avoid problems and/or reduce their exposure to flooding. Real estate agents and house hunters can find out if a property is flood prone and whether flood insurance may be required.

Communities can easily provide map information from FEMA's Flood Insurance Rate Maps (FIRMs) and Insurance Studies. They may also assist residents in requests for map amendments and revisions when they are needed to show that a building is outside the mapped floodplain.



Communities often supplement what is shown on the FIRM with maps that complement and clarify the FIRM and information on additional hazards, flooding outside mapped areas and zoning. When the map information is provided, community staff can explain insurance, property protection measures and mitigation options that are available to property owners. They should also remind inquirers that being outside the mapped floodplain is no guarantee that a property will never get wet.

**Property protection assistance:** While general information provided by outreach projects or the library helps, most property owners do not feel ready to retrofit their buildings without more specific guidance. Local building department staffs are experts in construction. They can provide free advice, not necessarily to design a protection measure, but to steer the owner onto the right track.

Building or public works department staff can provide the following types of assistance:

- Visit properties and offer protection suggestions
- Recommend or identify qualified or licensed contractors
- Inspect homes for anchoring of roofing and the home to the foundation
- Provide advice on protecting windows and garage doors from high winds
- Explain when building permits are needed for home improvements

**Local Implementation:** The Jersey County Health Department provides technical guidance related to septic system failure and well contamination. The Jersey County Floodplain Coordinator works with the local government officials as well as with the Health Department and public when someone inquires about properties located in the floodplain. The Floodplain Coordinator also provides technical assistance and mitigation techniques.

**CRS credit:** The Community Rating System provides 140 points for providing map information to inquirers. The community must keep the maps up to date. Up to 71 points are available for providing one-on-one flood protection assistance to residents and business and making site visits. Both services must be publicized.

## **9.5. Public Information Program Strategy**

### *Brochures, Newsletters and Website*

To encourage participation by area landowners, informational brochures have been developed for distribution throughout the watershed. GRLT publishes its own brochure about the Piasa Creek Watershed Project (PCWP). This brochure provides an overview of what a watershed is and basic facts regarding the Piasa Creek Watershed. The publication continues by illustrating the various problems associated by different types of erosion along with the tools GRLT uses to solve those particular problems. The brochure is distributed at Soil & Water Conservation Districts and USDA Service Centers, county courthouses, and libraries in the PCWP three county regions.

GRLT distributes a newsletter twice a year to approximately 2,500 residents of the region. Updates on the Piasa Creek Watershed Project are included in each issue.

The Piasa Creek Watershed Project is highlighted on the GRLT website, showing maps and an assortment of projects and updates on the effort. The website is [www.greatriverslandtrust.com](http://www.greatriverslandtrust.com).

### *Tours*

As various projects are completed, such as stream buffers, sediment basins, riffle pools, etc., tours will be arranged for area landowners to further encourage their participation by viewing successfully completed projects. On June 14, 2002, GRLT together with the PC-WET program hosted a driving tour of the major projects in the Piasa Creek Watershed

Project. The trip began at Lewis & Clark Community College and drove along the sites of various projects that have been implemented or are in the planning stages. Along the way, PC-WET participants performed water quality tests along certain areas of the creek. The tour proved to be a hands-on approach to learning about how various tools can be utilized to prevent sediment reduction in the Piasa Creek Watershed.

### *Press*

Piasa Creek Watershed Project has been publicized by various press releases since the project's beginning in 2000. These press releases have been in newspaper publications such as the St. Louis Post Dispatch, the Alton Telegraph, and the Illinois Business Journal. The project has also been featured in public radio announcements on WBGZ. Making the public more aware of this important project has made public acceptance of PWCP a reality. The following reflects in more detail some of the press releases during recent years.

- Illinois Business Journal (2001) – “Piasa Creek Watershed Project to have Benefits for All”
- Alton Telegraph (2002) – “Decision May Help River, Water Plant”
- St. Louis Post Dispatch (August 8, 2002) – “Organization Will Restore Lake at Boy Scout Camp”
- St. Louis Post Dispatch (September 5, 2002) – “Boy Scout Board OK's Plans to Develop Lake”
- St. Louis Post Dispatch (November, 2002) – “Piasa Watershed May Get Federal Fund Boost”
- Alton Telegraph (February 11, 2003) – “ Council recommends Catholic Charities Lease”
- Alton Telegraph (February 11, 2003) – “After years of planning, road project to begin”
- Alton Telegraph (October 3, 2003) – “Deal will preserve Scout camp in Godfrey: Conservation group plans to restore 15 acres at Camp Warren Levis”
- St. Louis Post-Dispatch (October 29, 2003) – “Joint project will restore use of silted-up lake at Scouts' Camp Warren Levis near Godfrey”
- Alton Telegraph (October 30, 2003) – “Open house Sunday at Camp Warren Levis”

## *Awards*

Piasa Creek Watershed Project was selected as a finalist for the 16th Annual Governor's Pollution Prevention Awards hosted by the Illinois Waste Management and Research Center (WMRC). The Governor's Pollution Prevention Awards annually honor Illinois companies and organizations that are making efforts to reduce their environmental impact and improve their economic viability. The award ceremony was held on October 18, 2002 in Champaign, Illinois. GRLT's Alley Ringhausen and Amanda Langford attended the event as well as Mark Johnson from IAW.

## *Piasa Creek Watershed Education Team Project*

The Piasa Creek Watershed Education Team Project (PCWET) is an academic environmental education project that allows middle school students to better understand the importance of water quality to their community and fosters a sense of stewardship for their watershed.

Twenty public and parochial middle schools and two public high schools are currently participating in the project. It utilizes the watershed as an outdoor classroom for over one thousand students in the three southwestern Illinois counties. Through a comprehensive watershed monitoring program, involving the latest educational technology, the students collect baseline data for the determination of long-term changes in the physical, chemical and biological parameters of the watershed. The parameters include flow rates, sedimentation loads, temperature, depth, pH, dissolved oxygen, phosphates, nitrates, hardness, BOD, fecal coli form and macro invertebrate indices.

## **9.6. Conclusions**

Jersey County uses public information programs and workshops to make people aware of local hazards to protect health, life and safety issues.

Jersey County is entering the Community Rating System by using the public information can earn nearly 500 points.

The Outreach Projects at the Library and future website will be able to reach others in the community.

## **9.7. Recommendations**

1. The following topics should be covered in public information activities.
  - How the area is exposed to natural hazards
  - What people should do to protect themselves and their health
  - What people can do to protect their property
  - What government agencies are doing and how they can help

2. Sample articles, with illustrations, on these topics should be prepared and distributed to all interested parties, such as public information offices, webmasters, permit offices, reception desks, and neighborhood organizations.
3. The following media should be used to convey these messages. They are listed in priority order as recommended by the Mitigation Planning Committee.
  - Articles in newsletters and mass mailings
  - Websites
  - Newspaper articles
  - Educational programs in schools
  - Library references
  - Handouts, protection guides
  - Technical advice and visits by staff
4. Each County office and municipality should review their current public information activities and incorporate the messages in them, where appropriate.
5. The County should provide an order form for local libraries to order free state and federal hazard mitigation publications.
6. Community websites should include information and links to other sites to cover as many topics as possible. It should also include a system for users to determine the flood hazard for their properties.
7. Jersey County community leaders develop and implement a comprehensive program of public information and education with regard to hazard mitigation.