
A STORY OF FEMA: SUCCESS, FRUSTRATION AND LESSONS LEARNED

by Mayor Luge Hardman



In the early morning hours of Aug. 6, 2013, the torrential rain falling on the city of Waynesville brought a feeling of foreboding of what was to come in the following days and weeks. Not able to sleep, I logged onto my Facebook page and wrote, "I am fearful of what tomorrow holds for us." As a new mayor, I was nervous and felt unprepared for such a disaster. Over a period of three days, 22 inches of rain inundated our community. When it was over, a young mother and her son had lost their lives: 23 homes in the City, and more than 260 homes throughout the County, were badly damaged. The City had suffered more than \$1,000,000 in damage to equipment and infrastructure. The residents of Waynesville were forever changed that night; not only because of material loss, but the loss of security.

Since the flood, with the help of Ameri-Corps and VISTA, we have begun a community organization, dedicated to disaster preparedness. Communities Organized Against Disaster (COAD), meets monthly and brings faith-based groups and non-faith-based entities together to prepare for disasters. We are a community that has learned valuable lessons from this tragedy.

CLEAN UP

The two weeks after the flood were busy with disaster response and clean up for citizens and city staff. Dealing with Federal Emergency Management Agency and State Emergency Management Agency (FEMA/SEMA) during the following months was an adventure. For many of us in the City, it was not a new event. In 2007, an ice storm had also devastated our community and our employees felt they were ready for what was to come. With camera in hand, Executive Assistant Sandy Willis took photo after photo,

documenting what was happening each day. Willis was the "paper person," in charge of all documentation and filling out the voluminous forms required by FEMA and SEMA.

City employees responded quickly and worked long hours to help residents recover. Ruined appliances, discarded food, mattresses, and household debris very quickly began to spoil in the summer heat; the stench became evident throughout the City. In the first two weeks, the City removed more than 300 tons of debris from affected residents. We relied on the sanitation company

and our municipal neighbors for help. Early on, FEMA denied individual assistance to our citizens; that presented an extra concern to the City, as we began to research different volunteer groups to help with the rebuilding and repair of individual homes.

The week after the flood, the City hired a hydrology team, Benton and Associates, to provide an analysis of the event and suggest plans for mitigation. The engineer's report highlighted a 100-year flood event for most of Waynesville, with pockets of a 500-year flood event around the Mitchell

Creek area. Waynesville is accustomed to the flooding of the Roubidoux River and in this case, it did flood. However, the major damage was from a small creek that runs through the City. Mitchell Creek overflowed its banks and devastated several residential areas. Mitchell Creek is the depository of more than 4,000 acres of watershed, including the south side of

Interstate 44. This area is under county jurisdiction and has no planning and zoning, thus no regulation for drainage and storm water to accommodate the massive amount of building that had taken place in recent years. The flash flood that day came barreling down on the residents of Waynesville, as Mitchell Creek collected all the storm water from across the Interstate.

ROCKY START

From the very beginning, FEMA/SEMA worked with the City to line out the recovery process. However, a number of FEMA representatives were assigned to Waynesville and Pulaski County. Meeting after meeting, new people would arrive and paperwork would be shuffled. Agents would have to learn names, locations, and people all over again. We felt however, that we had a handle on what was expected. We had a plan! We were going to make things better for our citizens and the City.

“Mitigation” became the key word for Waynesville in the weeks and months that followed the flood. Einstein’s quote is very appropriate for how we looked at this opportunity: “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result.” The City’s strategy was to correct the mistakes of years past of not addressing problem areas. We began the planning of four major mitigation projects to improve these areas. For many years, the flooding of the Roubidoux had caused damage to the baseball fields, the RV park and its shower house, the Roubidoux sewer lift station and the street department. This was an opportunity to correct that.

The consensus of the City Council was to move these facilities off the banks of the Roubidoux River and, in the case of the lift station, out of the actual creek bed. The lift station had been a constant hazard to the Roubidoux, as the sewage backs up in heavy rain and spews into the river. It was even termed “dangerous” at one

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point by DNR because of the gas it emitted. Correcting these issues was paramount, with an opportunity for help with funding the projects.

The City Council and City staff felt that the City was following the mission of FEMA - to lessen the effect of flooding. As strategies took shape, the City paid for the engineering and the design of these four major mitigation projects. We were not wasteful with tax money; in fact, in many instances we were using our own workers and assets

to save money and be more efficient in mitigating these problem areas.

Once we began to turn in requests for funding approval and begin the actual work, things took a bad turn. All of a sudden our “mitigation projects” became “alternate projects” and then, “improved projects” and we were told the funding would not be coming. For example, the lift station project, estimated at \$255,705, was cut to \$77,000, making the proposal of moving it out of the creek bed untenable for our



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budget. All four of the major mitigation projects took severe cuts, as the use of certain language made the projects not fit into specific categories. After all the work and planning, it seemed that our mitigation efforts were not going to happen.

Throughout this process, the paperwork became challenging; it seemed much more involved than in 2007. “The ice storm was fairly easy compared to the flood,” said Willis Things had changed at FEMA and the City was facing roadblocks.

In May 2015, the City requested a meeting with SEMA/FEMA in Jefferson City to air our complaints and appeal the funding decisions. The City expected an adversarial meeting and we were prepared with data and arguments. Willis, City Administrator Bruce Harrill and I met with the disaster team. Before we could deliver our prepared speeches, the SEMA/FEMA team announced a new set of reimbursement figures. We were told they had looked into our complaints and arguments and they had come to agree with us. We were astounded and thankful for a good ending to our concerns. At the end of the day, the people of Waynesville won and we believe that SEMA/FEMA won, too. The City became a positive example of mitigation.

Another major goal of the City continues to be attention to the Mitchell Creek area. Since 2013, the City has removed more than 320 tons of debris and gravel from the creek; the City is in the process of designing a gravel trap to stop the flow of gravel and debris from the large watershed across the Interstate. The City focused on improving storm drainage, and has also received a FEMA grant to replace the last of the low-water crossings with a bridge. We are beginning to remove the lift station and have already moved the Street Department to a new location on higher ground. The RV park is open and now has a new mobile shower house. The Kiwanis Ball Fields have been moved to higher ground. Things are improving and Waynesville is moving forward.

No city can build for a 100-year flood event, much less the pockets of a 500-year flood event that we experienced in 2013. As weather continues to become unpredictable, cities must be prepared for natural disasters. The city of Waynesville has persevered; now two years later, we continue to plan and improve emergency preparedness.

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Luge Hardman is the mayor of Waynesville. Elected in 2012, Hardman is a retired high school and college instructor. She has lived in Waynesville for more than 40 years.

TIPS FOR DEALING WITH DISASTER AND FEMA/SEMA

1. Have employee documentation on paper (time, equipment, materials, etc.).
2. Keep project documents in separate files.
3. Keep all e-mails and document all phone calls with FEMA/SEMA.
4. Document all mail to FEMA/SEMA.
5. Read the project thoroughly when returned from FEMA/SEMA. Make sure their narrative matches yours.

RESCUE AND RESPONSE RECOMMENDATIONS

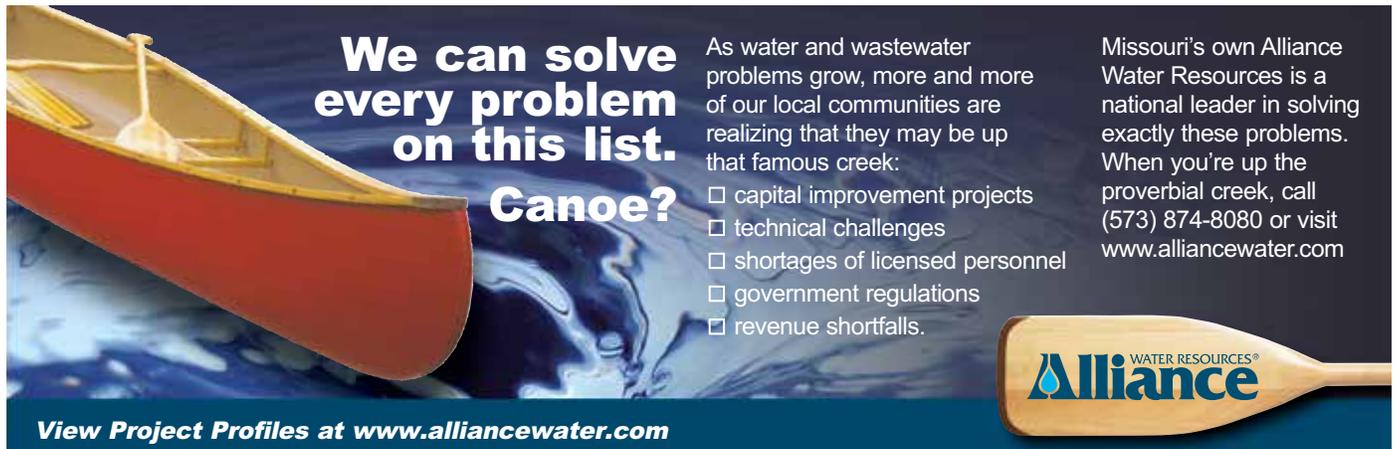
1. Utilize emergency preparedness plans.
2. Partner with first responders.
3. Determine losses and areas of concern.
4. Designate a headquarters or base of operations.
5. Designate a spokesman for the response team and media requests.
6. Use mutual aid agreements.
7. Designate a center for displaced persons.
8. Determine need for state law enforcement assistance.
9. Have a plan to manage volunteers and donations.
10. Research individual governmental assistance.

RECOVERY

1. Have plans for emergency housing and supplies.
2. Remove debris.
3. Use mutual aid agreements.

REBUILD

1. Plan for mitigation.
2. Designate point of contact for SEMA/FEMA.
3. Reassess emergency management procedures.
4. Expand mutual aid agreements.



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