NOAH HAD IT EASY

"In the beginning"...that's the way the 1217 page Gideon Bible in my room starts out. And then we have the story of creation (Adam and Eve)....our first fratricide (Cain and Abel), a few other things (including Methuselah, Noah's grandfather living 969 years)...and by the 6th page or so God is really, really, unhappy with the way things are going and he's planning a really big flood to clean things out and get a fresh start.

With hindsight it seems pretty clear that God didn't want to go through that whole creation thing again, so he picked out a patriarch and his family to survive this great flood and make a fresh start.

Now this story we know as NOAH and the Great Flood is not unique to our Judeo-Christian history. There are over 500 "great flood" stories and legends worldwide in other cultural histories and ancient civilizations --- Babylon, China, Scandinavia, Russia, India, Peru, Polynesia, many of the Native American tribes --- all have Great Flood stories as do many others--- which certainly confirms (at least to me) that at the beginning of civilization and what we would call human
history there was an epic flood event and that story became part of our worldwide lore ---our cultural DNA.

There are so many common elements in all of these stories --- warning of the flood, building of boat or some sort of vessel, including the family in the project, saving animals/seed for restocking, the release of birds to see if flood waters have receded --- that seem to indicate a common source for the stories... a cataclysmic consuming experience.

The Babylonia flood story as told in the Epic of Gilgamesh is virtually identical to our story of NOAH. The Aztec civilization tell an almost identical story about a pious man name TAPI who was told by the Creator to build a boat, bring his wife on board, get a pair of each animal type on board also. Naturally his neighbors, like Noah’s, thought he was crazy; but the rains came and the mountains were flooded. When the rain stopped, Tapi let loose a dove that didn’t return so he knew the flood was over.

We could go on and on with the same kind of stories from the Ojibwe tribe in the area of Minnesota or the Delaware Indians (who tell about a giant moss covered turtle who saved civilization on his back) or the Incas in Peru whose story is built around the llamas leading a shepherd family up into the mountains.
But let's return to NOAH - - - and the proposition set forth in the title for this presentation that Noah had it easy --- and that in today's world it might be a little bit different:

1) Noah had plenty of warning and it came from an impeccable source. He was able to totally mitigate his damages and save his family from harm along with a bunch of animals so he could start over when the flood was done.

Today our weather forecasting and warning systems are pretty good and getting better - - but in of terms giving us time to build a boat, secure our family members and save the world's animal population we have a long way to go.

2) Noah didn't have to hire a bunch of engineers and construction folks to accomplish his task. He didn't have to hire consultants or hydrologists to prepare studies giving him options on how to deal with upcoming flood. He had the supreme engineer of all engineers, to tell him what to do --- how to build his boat --- 300 cubits long, 50 cubits wide and 30 cubits high. A cubit is an average man's forearm...from elbow to fingertip...about a foot and a half.
3) Back in Noah’s time there were no regulatory agencies with permitting authority and required reports, on-site assessments, or threats to cut off funding or to stop work for an endangered species. No, in fact at the time all species were endangered, but the work proceeded.

4) Noah apparently had plenty of financial resources – he didn’t have to plead with a Commissioners Court (or the like) to put enough money in his budget so he could build and fully stock his boat. And he didn’t have to compete for scarce grant funding. He presumably had everything be needed; unlike today when we never seem to have enough.

5) In my reading of Noah’s story, I saw nothing about any requirement for public notice and public meetings, I’m sure there were plenty of public comments from the neighbors however about what he was doing and how this ark building and animal roundup activity was ruining the neighborhood.

6) There is some indication that Noah’s neighbors thought his actions were a little strange and probably made fun of him. That was probably tough on him and his family. BUT can you imagine how Noah would have
fared in today's cyber world of You Tube, Facebook, and all of the internet accessibility and cell phones with cameras and I-Pads and the like. Images of crazy old Noah and his strange activity would have gone viral and been on the 6'oclock new, cable talk shows, and David Letterman and Jay Leno would have a field day making fun of poor old crazy Noah. But Noah, escaped all of that derision --- and those who were laughing, Noah knew were going to get their payback soon enough.

So, I think Noah would have a much tougher time in today's world preparing for the great flood mitigation.

I use the comparison of Noah then and now to make the point that we live in a complex, crowded, and sometimes confusing world. The answers and directions do not always seem as clear as they were for Noah. The issue of scarce resources and funding confronts us always and the increasing regulation and requirements in an increasingly complex and interrelated community, state, nation and world seem at times to overwhelm us, or at least make it tough to accomplish our job.
That’s why it is so important that we communicate, communicate and above all communicate. And that doesn’t just mean talking clearly and knowledgeably to people; it means hearing and understanding what they are saying also. It means talking and listening to your employees, to your co-workers, your bosses. It means talking to and hearing from your elected officials, the regulators, the people who pay the taxes, the people who live in floodplains (or potentially in harms way), the engineers and technical folks who can help you (and, just as important those that can oppose you). That kind of communication is what I referred to in the agenda blurb as 360° communications... communicating both ways and in every direction. And that communication must be open and honest and clear. And you have to recognize and adapt to your audience. You can talk to your engineer, your fellow flood plain managers, and co-workers in a technical tongue with abbreviations and shorthand references that you all understand. You can’t use the same language when you’re talking to the guy about to build his home 10 feet inside of a floodplain or to a county judge whose background is corporate law or accounting or law enforcement or to a group of concerned citizens at a public meeting. When we sometimes are so focused on the issue or the problem at hand, we tend to forget our audience, we turn down or turn off our listening skills --- and as the famous movie line goes --- “What we have then is a failure to communicate.”
And of course all communication has to be seasoned with a great deal of patience. We have to be patient with the people, patient with the process and patient with the progress. That may be the hardest thing of all. You and I are often dealing with frustrated, or stubborn, or angry citizens. We can’t afford to reply in kind no matter how tempting it is. In those instances we are the professionals and in most instances we hold the cards – therefore we have the responsibility to be patient with people...Some who are angry; some who are very impatient; some who have “no clue”; and some just trying to learn and understand.

In our County we have a few NIMBY’s and CAVE people ...and it’s my bet that there are NIMBY’s and CAVE folks in each of the 254 counties in Texas and the other 49 states plus Washington D.C. These folks --- the NIMBY’s and CAVE’s are a special type of folks placed here on Earth to try the patience of Job and test the patience of every County Judge, Commissioner, and Flood Plain Manager and anyone else who is trying to accomplish some public task or project.

The NIMBY’s of course, are from the Not in My Back Yard tribe and the CAVE’s are members of the Citizens Against Virtually Everything clan. Communicating with each of them is different. The NIMBY is probably all for your alleviating the flooding issue in his
community --- he or she just doesn’t want to give you a drainage easement across his field or have some unsightly concrete drainage waterway next door. It’s a personal thing. The CAVE person however is different; he or she doesn’t want you doing anything, anywhere, at anytime. That’s usually because he or she doesn’t think it’s the government’s business, or it means spending more taxes, or it isn’t something that was needed in Grandpa’s time...or, my favorite, we’ve never done it before.

Each of these folks will test the limit of your listening skills, your communicating abilities, and your patience. I have no magic to offer you in dealing with these people --- except to remind you that they are individuals with homes, families, some good traits, some not so good, they have fears, concerns, questions --- and part of our job in communicating is to hear and understand those concerns and find a way to address them as clearly and calmly and rationally and objectively as possible.

We also need to be patient with the process. That is often hard. We want to short cut here or there. It’s tempting to say “we don’t really need these public meetings on our floodplain project”. Nobody ever shows up and even if they do it’s a waste of time and they never have
anything worthwhile to say.” I know because I’ve had those exact thoughts when I’ve had to hold those “required-by-law” public meetings that no one attended or said anything worthwhile. But I’ve been to meetings that have been well attended, that were appreciated by the community, and where we learned something or heard some good suggestions from our citizens and I think they learned something also. So be patient with the process --- whether its meeting with the public, submitting to a regulatory review, dealing with the elected officials, working with the outside firms. The process is often frustrating and time consuming in our “instant solution” world, but most of the time the process is in place for a good reason.

Finally be patient with the progress. To borrow an old saw “Rome was not built in a day” and neither are flood mitigation projects. When you’re dealing with the public and all the diverse stakeholders, especially the various layers of government not much can be accomplished in a hurry. I’ve discovered that most major Flood Plain management jobs and flood mitigation projects are measured in years – not days, or weeks, or even months. So bottom line make sure you aren’t holding things up and be patient with the progress of others that are making sure they aren’t holding things up either.
And, of course, a sense of humor is always a necessity. I’m not talking about the ability to tell a joke or laugh at one being told to you, although that talent can serve you well. I’m talking about being able to see the irony or disconnect in what you confront every day. Quick example and it happens to my County’s floodplain manager regularly. He’s explaining to a citizen that he can’t build his house in a particular location on his 5 acres because that spot is in a floodplain. The reply he gets is often a quote from the citizens neighbor who said “it has never flooded in this area the entire time he’s lived here” --- and it turns out the neighbor moved there from some other state about ten year ago. Ironically that neighbor’s opinion from ten years of experience is being weighed against engineering surveys, expensive maps, the possibility of no flood insurance --- and sometimes the neighbor’s opinion and advice is more valued by the citizens who wants to build in the flood plain. You have to smile....it mitigates the frustration.

Last year at this meeting you heard about our second story railroad that runs through the community of D’Hanis in our County. D’Hanis floods with some regularity because it is built in a floodplain between two significant flash-flood creeks. Yet most of the blame for the flooding is placed on the U.P. railroad that runs through town. Several folks there told us that it floods because the RR comes along ever so often and lifts the tracks about 3 inches. They’ve personally seen it and
that’s why the flooding gets worse each time because the RR keeps getting higher. They can’t seem to grasp that when the next train comes along, everything settles back into place. Actually the height of the railroad has not changed more than one inch in last 30 years or more. Otherwise the rail line would be 15 feet high above the crossing grades and approaches that TXDOT and the County maintain. And those approaches are still the same level they were 30 years ago. But still have some otherwise smart people who insist the railroad is higher than it used to be.

So a sense of humor helps you get through the day. However, it’s best that you keep your laughing to yourself or with your co-workers back in the office. Laughing out loud or shaking your head in disbelief in front of the concerned citizen doesn’t help to further your communication or your progress. But have a sense of humor --- don’t take yourself or what happens to you on the job dealing with the public too seriously. Please, however, continue to take your work very seriously. It is too important to too many people to do otherwise.

Finally, one of the most important things I’ve learned as County judge about the subject of floods and flood plains management is that you need to hire a good and knowledgeable and hardworking floodplain
manager, listen to his advice, give him or her your full support and have him or her continue to learn and expand their experiences by attending meetings such as this.

A few years ago I was visiting a friend who had retired to one of those nice Florida gated golfing communities. After the obligatory morning round of golf, we retired to the clubhouse for some card playing. At a table nearby some guys were talking with an apparent newcomer to the community. One of the men was recounting his experience of owning a clothing store up north and the fact that a fire totally destroyed his business. Since he was ready to retire anyway he took the insurance money and moved to Florida. Another of the residents told a similar story of living in the Midwest where he owned an electronics store which had also caught fire and burned to the ground. He too realized that he was of retirement age so he took the insurance money and moved to the gated community in Florida.

The newcomer remarked that it was odd but he had the same experience. He had built up a good warehousing business that had been totally destroyed by a flood. He had received insurance on the loss and had retired and moved to Florida. With that, the conversation around the table stopped and they looked at each other and then at the newcomers. The new guy, feeling uncomfortable, asked if he had said something
wrong. "No", one of the old guys, said, "We were just wondering...How do you start a flood?"

As floodplain managers you probably don’t know how to start a flood --- but it is important that you know how to stop it --- or at least mitigate its consequences.

Thank you for letting me be a part of your meeting.