

LVPC preparing the Lehigh Valley for disaster

Even before Harvey and Irma arrived, the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission was working on a plan to help the region better withstand the kind of destruction that swept through Texas and Florida earlier this month.

With help from a federal grant, the LVPC in August launched a more than yearlong effort to update a Hazard Mitigation Plan that will spell out how each of the Valley's 62 municipalities should prepare and respond to both natural and manmade disasters. A process that will include input by community leaders, emergency management officials and private citizens from across the region is scheduled to yield a new plan by October of 2018.

With two counties and more than five dozen separate governments expected to join in the process with federal and state officials, drafting a new plan won't come easy - or quickly. However, the result will not only provide a roadmap of how to prepare for disaster before they happen, but it will help make the region's municipalities eligible for Federal Emergency Management Agency disaster relief funding.

"The Hazard Mitigation Plan is critical to the Lehigh Valley for understanding the risks we have, lessening the impacts of hazards, identifying actions we can take to become even better prepared in the future and positioning ourselves to fund needed improvements," said LVPC Director of Environmental Planning Geoffrey Reese, who is leading the team updating the plan.

After hurricanes Sandy and Katrina, FEMA changed the mitigation requirements to not only address emergency response and individual hazards, but land use planning and resiliency -- issues that have come to greater light after disasters devastated low-lying neighborhoods in New Orleans and Houston. It will help prevent building in areas where flooding can be expected, but some of those areas have already been developed in the Lehigh Valley, said LVPC Executive Director Becky Bradley.

"This will help address some of the complexities in our region," Bradley said. "However, we have significant legacy issues, in some cases 200-year old ones that include multiple city downtowns in floodplains. That will need to be managed through zoning and land use laws locally."

Public meetings are expected to begin in February, but guarding the Lehigh Valley against flooding has been an ongoing effort for years. The LVPC recently completed a draft update of the Monocacy Creek Stormwater Management Plan in partnership with the City of Bethlehem, the 12 other communities in the watershed and both counties. The plan, which could be adopted by early next year, is important because it includes an update to the regional stormwater management ordinance that LVPC professionals are hoping can be applied to the entire region, Bradley said.

LVPC staff also recently drafted Green Infrastructure Guidelines for the region. The Lehigh Valley is the only region in the state that has a plan for all 16 of its watersheds while maintaining a full-time water engineering staff. Bolstering that effort is the fact that the LVPC reviews development projects against stormwater management standards.

"Those reviews are a critical step in avoiding development-related disasters, such as the one in Houston, to protect water quality, manage the environment and above all, protect human life," Bradley said.

With guidance from the LVPC's model floodplain ordinance, the Planning Commission, along with the County Planning Director's Association of Pennsylvania, developed an Integrated Water Resources Management education guide and is refining best practices case studies for release later this year. Governor Tom Wolf has asked the Department of Environmental Protection to use the LVPC model to

update the State Water Plan.

“All-in-all our region is better prepared than most because of the collaboration of the LVPC with our emergency management teams, municipal governments and counties. These partnerships are unheard of in most places in our nation and something that I am particularly proud of,” Bradley said. “Nevertheless, we will as a Lehigh Valley team continue to work to protect the public health, safety and welfare, and evolve our thinking as we learn more from disasters like Harvey and Irma, prepare for a new climate future and discover ways to remain resilient in light of manmade and natural hazards.”