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Lehigh Valley Communities Becoming More Resilient

Some communities intend to remove or relocate structures that have been repeatedly flooded, some will seek back-up generators to keep essential services running during blackouts, and many are taking steps to keep residents from dying from drug overdose.

The *Lehigh Valley Hazard Mitigation Plan* is designed to help communities from across the region prepare for disasters such as hurricanes, floods and the drug overdose crisis. The concept behind the Plan is simple: save lives and prevent property loss by preparing for disaster before it hits.

“This isn’t only a job for the emergency management professionals. Everyone plays a role in making the region more resilient, from planners to municipal leaders to private developers to private citizens,” said Becky Bradley, Executive Director of the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission. “We have a shared responsibility to use hazard mitigation planning to save lives, property and the environment.”

A working copy of the 2018 Plan is now available for public review at LVPC.org/hazard-mitigation.html, and two public meetings to discuss the working draft are scheduled for Tuesday, July 10. A noon Planning and Pizza session at the LVPC offices and a second meeting at 7 p.m. at the Catasauqua Municipal Building will give people a chance to comment on the draft. The plan remains in a 30-day public comment period through August 1.

The Plan still addresses 22 natural and non-natural hazards that were covered in the previous plan. Hurricanes, sinkholes, winter storms and drought remain serious risks, and flooding is still the number one threat to communities across the region, but three new hazards have been added to combat changes in a region that is growing by more than 5,000 residents per year.

Nearly 200 Lehigh Valley residents died from drug overdose in 2016, therefore, the new Drug Overdose Crisis hazard was added.

Invasive Species was added as a hazard to help people deal with the growing damage caused by the arrival of the Spotted Lanternfly, Emerald Ash Borer, Hemlock Woolly Adelgid, Gypsy Moth and Asian Tiger Mosquito. Pandemic and Infectious Disease was added as a hazard for the first time, and thousands of people who fled to the Lehigh Valley from hurricane-ravaged Puerto Rico last fall prompted the consideration of population evacuation strategies where they apply.

“Our community has evolved since the last plan, therefore our Hazard Mitigation Plan must evolve with it,” said LVPC Environmental Planning Director Geoff Reese. “The new hazards studied are threats that have historically impacted the Lehigh Valley, but have evolved to a greater level of concern.”

The LVPC is partnered with Lehigh and Northampton counties to draft an update to the *2013 Regional Hazard Mitigation Plan*. However, a plan that's been more than a year in the making has included participation by all 62 municipalities.

In the 2018 Plan, every community in the region has included actions to protect their residents and property from flooding. Major floods in 2004, 2005 and 2006 forced people from hundreds of homes and businesses.

Many communities also include an action to buy back-up generators that would help them keep essential services running during a prolonged power outage, such as when Hurricane Sandy brought 80 mile per hour winds and doused power to 200,000 homes for as long as a week in 2012.

Many municipalities are developing education and outreach programs to help residents get treatment for drug addiction. Some of those actions include providing first responders with a constant supply of Naloxone, the medication designed to rapidly reverse opioid impacts. While hundreds have died from drug overdose in recent years, many more have been saved from death by police, fire and medical professionals using Naloxone.

But implementing many of the actions laid out in the Plan—it includes more than 1,000 actions proposed by Valley communities—is dependent on Federal Emergency Management Agency grant funding. Since 2006, more than \$3 million in FEMA grants have been spent on hazard mitigation projects that include removing flood-prone properties in Lower Macungie Township and buying generators for communities across the Lehigh Valley. To be eligible for that funding, municipalities must not only participate in building the plan, but adopt it once it is state and federally approved.

“Our municipal partners have spent months helping to put this plan together,” Reese said. “But we really need them to take that final step. It’s important for all 62 communities to adopt the plan.”