

Over a century of flooding on the Chippewa River, Eau Claire, Wisconsin



W. Side Forest Street



Upper left: Flooding on Forest St. and Madison in 1884.

Upper center: Water Street in the floods of 1905.

Upper right: The west side of Forest Street in 1954.

Left: Madison Street looking east towards downtown from the bridge in 1905.

Right: The "Big Flood of 1967," 46 families had to be evacuated from the Forest Street area.

Historically, flooding from the Chippewa River took its toll on residents of the Forest Street neighborhood in the City of Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Starting in 1993, the city began to turn the tide on damages created by repetitive flooding when it implemented an acquisition program supported by FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program.

Mitigation Planning Leads to Urban Renewal

From the devastation of flooding has grown a planned revitalization of downtown Eau Claire. The west central Wisconsin city is changing its vulnerability to flooding into a recreational and esthetic amenity that is spurring downtown economic growth.

History is repeating itself in Eau Claire. The Eau Claire and Chippewa rivers first brought settlers to the area. Here, loggers capitalized on the bounty of the woods. The growing city on the river served as an economic center during the logging decades of the 1850s to 1880s. When that ‘boom era’ passed, the city rebuilt as an industrial and medical center for the surrounding agricultural industry. The city is in another phase of rebuilding its downtown, this time after the shopping malls and freeway corridors influenced the development of retail centers on the outskirts of town. The Chippewa River, now bordered with newly opened up green space, is once again bringing commerce to downtown Eau Claire.



An architectural reminder of the lumbering era in Eau Claire.

The Cycle of Flooding

...and plans to end it.

Nearly every spring, houses in the Forest Street neighborhood on the northern edge of downtown and near the Chippewa River filled with floodwaters. The 100-year-old houses were deteriorating from successive flooding and age.

The third highest flood of record hit the city in 1993. People nicknamed it the ‘Great Flood’. Homes in the Forest Street neighborhood were among the 75 structures in the city that had river water in the basements. The estimated cost to the city in damages and flood fighting was \$750,000.

The federal disaster declaration of 1993 triggered FEMA’s Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP). Armed with HMGP funds, city officials acquired 50 properties in the five-block Forest Street neighborhood. [“Although other areas of the city also incurred flooding, the city chose these homes to acquire because of the 100-percent](#)

Flood Stage at Grand Avenue Bridge	773.0	Feet over Flood Stage
June, 1993	778.9	5.9
March, 1990	771.4	1.6
April, 1986	774.9	1.9
April 1976	773.8	.8
May 3, 1973	774.0	1.0
March 16, 1973	775.4	2.4
April 1971	773.0	.1
April 2, 1967	779.6	6.6
May, 1954	778.5	5.5
September 9, 1941	781.6	8.6
September 10, 1884	785.9	12.9

Acquisition Type: 1993	Number
Single Family Homes	30
Duplex	11
Tri-plex	3
Four-plex	1
Vacant lots	5
Total Properties Acquired	50

participation by property owners in a concentrated area,” said Donna Meier, Project and Acquisitions Coordinator for the city’s Department of Finance. “Every year these homes were flooded. It was very destructive. People saw that they were much better off getting out of there and everyone agreed to sell.”

In the summer of 2001, the City of Eau Claire approved ambitious plans for the space left vacant by the demolition of flood-prone homes and rental units. The 13.5-acre green space would be linked to another nearby redevelopment area along the river to form a riverfront park. The Redevelopment Plan introduction states, “The open space is readily accessible to

downtown businesses, the government center, the University of Wisconsin campus and surrounding neighborhoods. The riverside edges of the site offer excellent views, water access, and an attractive urban destination in the heart of the city.”

The buy-out of homes and resulting vacant acreage prompted the development of the park plan. In turn, the planned park, with river vistas bordering the city’s downtown, instigated further redevelopment interest in downtown.

“The acquisition program was a significant catalyst to our downtown revitalization,” said Rebecca Noland, Finance Director, City of Eau Claire. “The buyout area had a lot of unsafe, flood-prone houses in it and by removing the houses and opening up the green space we brought attention to the area.”

Subsequent to the buyout, a redevelopment district was set up by the city within the downtown area. Funding from a Community Development Block Grant and an Economic Development Fund have enabled the city to pursue the acquisition of blighted buildings and the sale of cleared lots for commercial use. A \$3.6 million major medical office building has already been built in downtown Eau Claire.

“We believe in a few years we’ll be seeing five to ten million dollars in development in our downtown area. Within seven years it’ll be a showplace,” said Noland.

Project Costs: 1993	
Total	\$2,185,359
FEMA HMGP	\$1,614,623
State Contribution	269,104
City Contribution	\$269,104

The proposed plan for the riverside green space includes walking trails, picnic areas and play areas. Ken Van Es, Director of Parks and Recreation for the City of Eau Claire, said the city will be taking out a street that fronted the houses, and moving some power lines.

“We’ll be creating places to view the river and to access the river for fishing,” said Van Es. “Providing that amount of green space in an urban area will provide benefits to the residents, not only in the nearby neighborhoods, but to the whole community and the people who visit downtown.”

Prologue

The City of Eau Claire has demonstrated its resolve to mitigate against future disaster damage with foresight, planning and financial commitments. Strategic planning for Y2K, proactively pursuing funds for community mitigation and developing relationships with state and local agencies, helped the city gain approval for a \$300,000 grant in pre-disaster mitigation funds under the FEMA Project Impact Initiative. Partnerships forged, including major businesses, the newspaper, the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire, the chamber of commerce, medical facilities and emergency responders, have set the stage for successful solutions. The city plans to focus on a disaster preparedness outreach campaign and to prepare an all hazard mitigation plan.

Eau Claire continues acquiring flood-prone properties with HMGP funds awarded as a result of the 2000 disaster declaration. This acquisition proposal adds multiple homes in another neighborhood that experiences rainwater run off from the surrounding hills into a low lying residential street. With the Project Impact dollars and the plans to remove more homes from frequently flooded areas, Eau Claire continues to demonstrate the best of mitigation – taking action now to prevent future losses of life and property from disasters.

For more information on mitigation in the state of Wisconsin, please contact Roxanne Gray, State Hazard Mitigation Officer, by phone at (608) 242-3211 or email at grayr@dma.state.wi.us. For more information about the Wisconsin Department of Emergency Management, see www.state.wi.us/agencies/dma.

For more information on the City of Eau Claire, see www.ci.eau-claire.wi.us , or if you want to know more about this project, contact Donna C. Meier at (715) 830-6044 or dcmeier@ci.eau-claire.wi.us.

