

Chapter 9. Public Information

A successful hazard mitigation program involves both the public and private sectors. Public information activities advise property owners, renters, businesses, and local officials about hazards and ways to protect people and property from these hazards. These activities can motivate people to take steps to protect themselves and others.

Information can bring about voluntary mitigation activities at little or no cost to the government. Property owners mitigated their flooding problems long before there were government funding programs. A study of northeastern Illinois public information efforts found that people acted on information (see box). In fact, 60% of Illinois respondents who had retrofitted their homes, did so without outside financial assistance.

The usual approach to delivering information involves two levels of activity. The first is to broadcast a short and simple version of the message to everyone potentially affected. The second level provides more detailed information to those who want to learn more.

This chapter starts with activities that reach out to people and tell them to be advised of the hazards and some of the things they can do. It then covers additional sources of information for those who want to learn more. It ends with an overall public information strategy.

Information Brings Results

Dr. Shirley Laska of the University of New Orleans has studied various programs that encourage floodprone homeowner “self-protective behavior.” In her book she notes

“The research reported herein demonstrates considerable interest among and effort by flooded homeowners to retrofit their homes to protect them from future flood damage. Several measures were undertaken by those who retrofitted. Moreover, they spent their own money – often considerable sums – to implement the measures....

“Having some source of retrofitting information appeared to encourage retrofitting, and the measures implemented by flooded homeowners who did consult an information source were evaluated by those owners as more protective than the measures implemented by homeowners who did not rely on a source [of information].”

Floodproof Retrofitting – Homeowner Self-Protective Behavior, University of Colorado, 1991, pages 221 and 223.

9.1. Outreach Projects

Outreach projects are the first step in the process of orienting people to the hazards they face. They are designed to encourage people to seek out more information in order to take steps to protect themselves and their properties.

Research has proven that outreach projects work (see box). However, awareness of the hazard is not enough; people need to be told what they can do about the hazard, so projects should include information on safety, health and property protection measures. Research has also shown that a properly run local information program is more effective than national advertising or publicity campaigns. Therefore, outreach projects should be locally designed and tailored to meet local conditions.

The most effective types of outreach projects are mailed or distributed to everyone in the community or, in the case of floods, to floodplain property owners.

Local newspapers can be strong allies in efforts to inform the public, but they don't reach as many people as a community newsletter. Press releases and story ideas may be all that's needed to whet their interest. After a tornado in another community, people and the media become interested in their tornado hazard and how to protect themselves and their property. Local radio stations and cable TV channels can also help.

Other approaches: Examples of other approaches include:

- Presentations at meetings of neighborhood, civic or business groups,
- Displays in public buildings or shopping malls,
- Signs in parks, along trails and on waterfronts that explain the natural features (such as the river) and their relation to hazards (such as floods),
- Videos for cable TV or to loan to organizations or individuals,
- Brochures available in municipal buildings and libraries (see examples, below),
- School programs, activities, and handouts, and
- Special meetings, such as floodproofing open houses.





Local implementation: The table below identifies the major public information activities currently being implemented by communities in Kankakee County. It can be seen that only three communities have their own newsletter, although three more plan to start one. Eight communities and the Community College have their own websites.

Public Information Activities					
	Newsletter	Website	Hazard Info	Read FIRMs	Technical assistance
Aroma Park	No	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes
Bourbonnais	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Bradley	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Kankakee	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Manteno	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Momence	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Sun River Terrace	No	No	N/A	No	No
Uninc. County	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
K. Com. College	Yes	Yes	No	N/A	N/A

The “Hazard Info” column identifies whether the newsletters or websites have included hazard related information. As seen by the following examples, some emergency preparedness information is provided, but most do not include many details about natural hazards or information on how to protect oneself from them.

- Chebanse’s March 2005 newsletter and Kankakee’s website provide information about their outdoor warning siren system.
- The May 2004 issue of Bonfield’s Village newsletter included an article on West Nile virus, the January 2004 issue called for volunteers to serve in the County’s Community Emergency Response Team (CERT), and the March 2005 edition announced this hazard mitigation plan and the opportunity for public input.
- Several communities place brochures in public places, such as where people pay utility bills. These have include insurance company flyers on tornado safety.
- The Village of Herscher has a two page handout that covers all the important information a resident should know, such as Village phone numbers, Village Board members, permit requirements, the website, and a reminder to not blow grass clippings into the streets “as it will clog the drainage system.”
- The Community College’s “Emergency and Safety Procedures” brochure, (see page 7-12), is given to all staff and is available for anyone else to pick up.
- The County Planning Department setup a satellite office at the Momence City Hall immediately after the 2008 flood to help residents obtain information about recovery, building permits, and mitigating damage.
- The River Roundtable has hosted informational events open to the public to disseminate information about the Kankakee River and the Roundtable’s activities.

- Staff from the County Planning Department regularly attends the Kankakee County Home Builders Association’s annual spring home builder’s show. At this event information, brochures, and other documents are distributed to the public.



CRS credit: The Community Rating System provides up to 350 points for outreach projects on flood topics. 100 of those points are for having a public information program strategy. This *Plan* qualifies for the strategy credit (see Section 9.5).

Repetitive loss outreach project: The Community Rating System requires communities with one or more repetitive loss property to send out an outreach project at least once each year. This would affect Kankakee, Aroma Park and the County.

The project goes to all properties in the repetitive loss *areas*. Such projects are typically 2 – 6 page letters mailed before the local flood season. They must cover

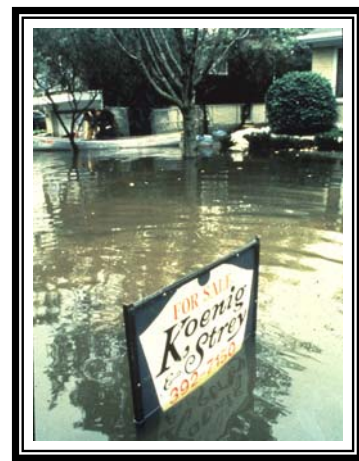
- That the property is in or near an area subject to flooding,
- Property protection measures appropriate for the flood situation,
- Sources of financial assistance for property protection measures, and
- Basic facts about flood insurance.

9.2. Real Estate Disclosure

Many times after a flood or other natural disaster, people say they would have taken steps to protect themselves if only they had known they had purchased a property exposed to a hazard. Three regulations, one federal and two state, require that potential buyers of a parcel be told of their exposure to a hazard.

Flood Disaster Protection Act: Federally regulated lending institutions must advise applicants for a mortgage or other loan that is to be secured by an insurable building that the property is in a floodplain as shown on the Flood Insurance Rate Map.

Flood insurance is required for buildings located within the A Zone if the mortgage or loan is federally insured. However, there is no legal requirement as to how far in advance of closing the disclosure must occur. Sometimes, local officials are called on the day of closing by a distressed home buyer. Often, the bank’s information is provided after the loan applicant is already committed to purchasing the property.



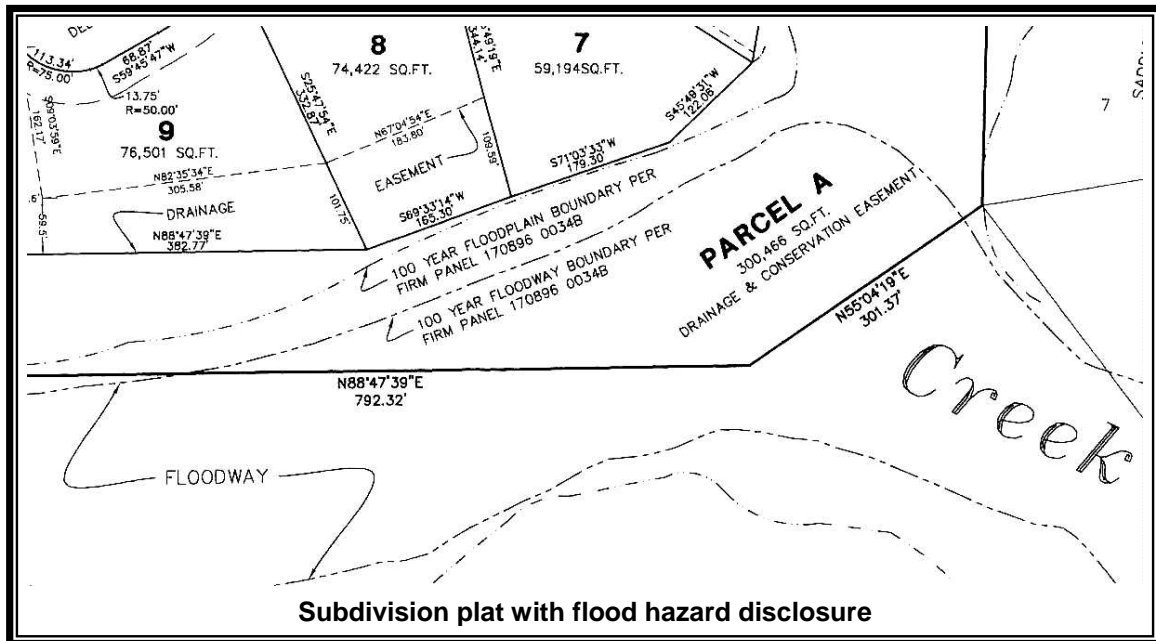
Illinois Residential Real Property Disclosure Act: This law requires a seller to tell a potential buyer:


- If the seller is aware of any flooding or basement leakage problem,
- If the property is located in a floodplain or if the

- seller has flood insurance,
- If the seller is aware of a radon problem,
- If the seller is aware of any mine subsidence or earth stability defects on the premises, and
- If the seller is aware of any structural defects.

This State law is not wholly reliable because the seller must be aware of a problem and willing to state it on the disclosure form. Due to the sporadic occurrence of flood events, a property owner may legitimately not be aware of potential flooding problems when a property is being sold. Practices by local real estate boards can overcome the deficiencies of these laws and advise newcomers about the hazard earlier. They may also encourage disclosure of past flooding or sewer problems, regardless of whether the property is in a mapped floodplain.

Subdivision plats: *Illinois Compiled Statutes*, Chapter 55, Section 5/3-5029 requires that all subdivision plats must show whether any part of the subdivision is located in the 100-year floodplain (see example below).



 **Local implementation:** The Kankakee County Association of Realtors® administers the Multiple Listing Service used by real estate offices in the County. It does not list potential hazards, such as whether a property is in a floodplain. A sample of real estate agencies’ website postings of available properties did not reveal any disclosure, either, although listings state “waterfront property” or “riverview charmer” (with basement). However, the Association stated that it would be glad to meet with County or municipal staff to discuss possible activities.



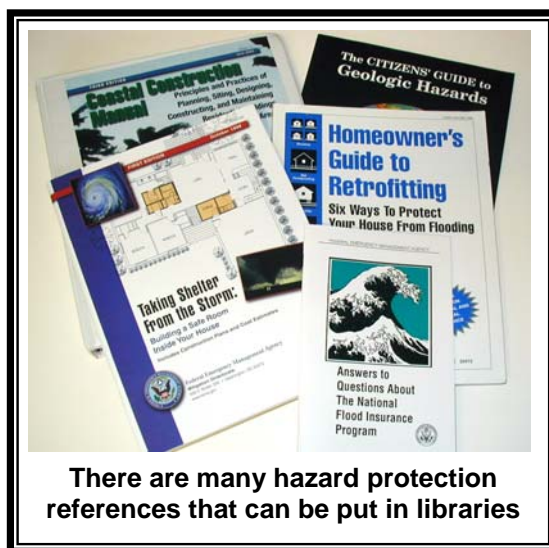
CRS credit: Communities would receive 10 points for the two state laws. Up to 41 more points are available if real estate agents implemented a program that checked the FIRMs before a property was listed and provided the flood hazard information to house hunters. Ten points would be provided if local real estate agents gave out brochures that advised people to check out a property's hazards before they commit to a purchase.

9.3. Technical Information

After an outreach project or real estate disclosure makes a person aware that a property is subject to a hazard, that person should look further into the hazard and ways to mitigate its effects. The community can help by providing technical information and assistance. The community library and local web sites are obvious places for residents to seek information on hazards, hazard protection, and protecting natural resources.

Library: Books and pamphlets on hazard mitigation can be given to libraries, many of them obtained free from state and federal agencies. Libraries also have their own public information campaigns with displays, lectures, and other projects, which can augment the activities of the local government.

Handbook: Research has shown that a publication tailored to local conditions, especially one that is seen as written for the reader's situation, is more effective than a general reference. The reader can identify with the situation and may have personally seen some of the examples. As a result, readers of such localized books are more likely to implement a property protection project.



Website: Today, websites are becoming more popular as research tools. They provide quick access to a wealth of public and private sites and sources of information. Through links to other web sites, there is almost no limit to the amount of up to date information that can be accessed by the user.

In addition to on-line floodplain maps, websites can link to information for homeowners on how to retrofit for tornadoes, earthquakes and floods and a "FEMA for Kids" site (www.fema.gov/kids/). This website teaches children how to protect their home and what to have in a family disaster kit.



Local implementation: Library: Kankakee County libraries are members of the multi-county Heritage Area Library System, giving each access to the publications in

any of the system libraries. However, a search of the word “flood” in Kankakee area libraries found only five references, three of them histories of floods elsewhere (in Venice and Johnstown, Pennsylvania) and two of them technical references. “Tornado” found 25 documents, but many of them were stories (including *The Wizard of Oz*). A search of the Community College’s on line library catalog found more references, but none of them guides for property owners or how to mitigation the effects of the hazards.

Handbook: The County EMA office provides a 25 page booklet entitled “Family Emergency and Disaster Plan.” It has information on protection measures for the hazards of fire, flood, tornado, and terrorism along with checklists, website resources, and a place to write a family’s emergency phone numbers. There are state and northeastern Illinois guides to flood protection that could be copied by any community for distribution to its floodplain residents.

Website: The table on page 9-3 identifies the eight communities that have their own websites. Only Kankakee and the County’s sites have emergency or hazard information. The City’s relates to its siren system.

The County’s code enforcement website has a page on floodplain management, including photos from recent floods and a discussion about why floodplain regulations are needed. A link provides access to scanned versions of all Flood Insurance Rate Maps in the County.



CRS credit: The Community Rating System provides up to 30 points for having a variety of flood references in the local public library and up to 36 more for similar material on municipal web sites.

9.4. Technical Assistance

Map reading: Many benefits stem from providing hazard information to inquirers. Residents and business owners who are aware of the potential hazards can take steps to avoid problems and/or reduce their exposure. Real estate agents and house hunters can find out if a property is floodprone and whether flood insurance may be required.

Communities can easily provide map information from FEMA’s Flood Insurance Rate Maps (FIRMs) and Flood Insurance Studies. They may also assist residents in submitting requests for map amendments and revisions when they are needed to show that a building is outside the mapped floodplain.

Communities often supplement what is shown on the FIRM with maps that complement and clarify the FIRM and information on additional hazards, flooding outside mapped areas and zoning. When the map information is provided, community staff can explain insurance, property protection measures and mitigation options that are available to property owners. They should also remind inquirers that being outside the mapped floodplain is no guarantee that a property will never get wet.

Property protection assistance: While information provided by outreach projects, the library or a website helps, most property owners do not feel ready to regrade their yards,

install a tornado shelter, or retrofit their homes without more specific guidance. Local building department staffs are experts in construction. They can provide free advice, not necessarily to design a protection measure, but to steer the owner onto the right track. Building or public works department staff can provide the following types of assistance:

- Visit properties and offer protection suggestions
- Recommend or identify qualified or licensed contractors
- Inspect homes for anchoring of roofing and the home to the foundation
- Provide advice on protecting windows and garage doors from high winds
- Explain when building permits are needed for home improvements



Local implementation: The last two columns in the table on page 9-3 identify which communities help inquirers read their Flood Insurance Rate Maps (six of the eight mapped communities) and provide technical advice on property protection (four communities). None of the communities advertise these services.



CRS credit: The Community Rating System provides 90 points for providing map information to inquirers.

9.5. Public Information Program Strategy

A public information program strategy is a document that receives CRS credit. It is a review of local conditions, local public information needs, and a recommended action plan of activities. A strategy consists of the following parts, which are incorporated into this plan.

- The local flood hazard – discussed in Chapter 2 of this plan.
- The property protection measures appropriate for a specific hazard – discussed in chapter 5.
- Flood safety measures appropriate for the local situation – discussed in the box on the next page.
- The public information activities currently being implemented within the community including those by non-government agencies – discussed in sections 9.1 – 9.4.
- Goals for the community’s public information program – covered in Chapter 4.
 - The outreach projects that will be done each year to reach the goals – in section 9.7’s recommendations and Chapter 10’s action plan.
- The process that will be followed to monitor and evaluate the projects – in Chapter 10’s action plan.

Public information topics: At its June 21, 2013, meeting, the Mitigation Advisory Task Force reviewed the various public information activities and the conclusions and

recommendations of this chapter. An exercise was conducted to identify the most important topics that should be explained to the public.

Each Task Force member was given the handout that appears on page 9-11. The handout lists 53 possible topics that would be useful for residents and businesses to know. The members were asked to check the 10 topics they felt were most important to convey. They could also add other topics not listed.

The handout on page 9-11 shows the actual scores for each topic. After a review of the results, the higher scoring topics were organized and combined. It was concluded that the following topics deserved the most attention:

- Family preparedness.
- Protecting water quality.
- Flood safety precautions.
- Winter storm and thunder storm safety precautions.
- Warning signals.
- Beautify the riverfront.
- Safety in vehicles.

A second exercise was conducted to identify the most effective ways to convey the various messages to residents and businesses. A handout with 32 different ways to communicate was given to each Task Force member. They were asked to identify the five most important ways.

The handout on page 9-12 shows the actual “votes” for each approach. After a review of the results, the higher scoring media were organized and combined. It was concluded that the following media are preferred for explaining hazard mitigation topics to the public. They are listed in order of preference.

- Newspaper articles.
- County-wide newsletter.
- Website with links to other sources.
- Radio public service announcements

Public Information Topics

There are a variety of messages that can be delivered to property owners, businesses, school children and other members of the “public.” The following are listed in alphabetical order.

Please review these messages and check off the **10** that you think are the most important. Scratch out any messages that should not be used and feel free to suggest different words.

- | | |
|--|--|
| 4 Beautifying the riverfront | 1 Safety in buildings |
| 0 Benefits of open space | 4 Safety in vehicles |
| 0 Dealing with contractors | 3 Sewer backup protection measures |
| 0 Earthquake safety precautions | 3 Sources of assistance |
| 2 Economic impact of natural hazards | 0 Status of flood control projects |
| 6 Emergency protection measures | 0 Status of implementing the mitigation plan |
| 8 Family preparedness | 5 Storm safety precautions |
| 2 Flood Insurance Rate Maps | 2 Substantial damage regulations |
| 5 Flood safety precautions | 7 Tornado safety precautions |
| 1 Floodproofing a business | 5 Warning signals |
| 0 Floodproofing a house | 0 Ways to protect a building from hail |
| 3 Health hazards | 0 What a flood insurance policy covers |
| 3 How to evacuate during a storm/flood | 1 What state and federal agencies are doing |
| 1 How to get out of buying flood insurance | 4 What the community is doing |
| 1 Local drainage protection | 0 What to do during an ice jam |
| 2 Making sure your yard drains | 0 When flood insurance must be purchased |
| 3 Materials on the website | 2 Whether a building is in a floodplain |
| 1 Past disasters in the County | 1 Who is responsible for flooding |
| 1 Preparing a building for a winter storm | 1 Why channel maintenance is important |
| 0 Preserving and protecting wetlands | 0 Why it floods |
| 2 Protecting a manufactured home from wind | 0 Wildfire property protection measures |
| 5 Protecting water quality | 2 Wildfire safety precautions |
| 0 References in the local library | 0 Wind protection measures |
| 1 Reporting construction violations | 5 Winter storm safety precautions |
| 1 Reporting dumping violations | 0 Other: |
| 0 Retrofitting a building for tornado protection | 0 Other: |
| 0 Retrofitting for earthquake protection | Other: _____ |
| 1 Rules against dumping in streams | Other: _____ |
| 3 Rules on building in the floodplain | |

Handout used to determine the most important topics for a public information program to explain to residents and businesses.

Public Information Media

There are many different ways to convey the messages about hazards, safety precautions, and ways to protect one's property. The following are listed in alphabetical order.

Please review these media and check off the **5** that you think are the most important. Scratch out any media that should not be used and feel free to suggest different ones.

- 3 Cable TV notices
- 0 Displays in home improvement stores
- 2 Educational programs in grade schools
- 2 Educational programs in high schools
- 1 Educational programs in junior high
- 2 Handouts/flyers at public places
- 2 Homeowner's flood protection handbook
- 2 Mass mailing to all floodplain residents/businesses
- 2 Mass mailing to all residents/businesses
- 7 Newspaper articles
- 2 Newspaper supplements
- 1 News releases
- 0 Open houses/contractors' shows
- 6 County-wide newsletter
- 2 Municipal newsletter
- 0 Park/recreation department educational programs
- 0 Presentations at neighborhood meeting
- 0 Presentations to banks and lenders
- 0 Presentations to contractors
- 0 Presentations to insurance agents
- 1 Presentations to organizations or clubs
- 0 Presentations to real estate agents
- 0 References available in the library
- 1 Shopping mall displays
- 1 Special events (e.g., "Tornado Awareness Week")
- 0 Technical advice from community staff
- 0 Telephone book/"Yellow Book"
- 2 Utility bill stuffers
- 1 Videos/Cable TV programs
- 0 Visits to a home by community staff
- 6 Web site with links to other sources
- 6 Other: Radio public service announcements
- Other: _____

Handout used to determine the best ways for a public information program to convey messages to residents and businesses.



CRS credit: The Community Rating System provides 200 points for a public information program strategy. The CRS provides the most credit for direct mailings to floodplain residents. Credit also favors newsletters, websites, libraries, and providing map information and technical assistance. Fewer points are given for other media, such as presentations at meetings and booths at shopping malls because they reach fewer people.

9.6. Conclusions

1. There are many ways that public information programs can be used so that people and businesses will be more aware of the hazards they face and how they can protect themselves.
2. Outreach projects, newsletters, libraries and websites can reach a lot of people, but most communities are not including much hazard or mitigation information in their current activities.
3. Current practices that disclose hazards to buyers of property are either dependent on the seller or provide the information late in the process.
4. The most important topics to cover in public information activities are:
 - Family preparedness.
 - Protecting water quality.
 - Flood safety precautions.
 - Winter storm and thunder storm safety precautions.
 - Warning signals.
 - Beautify the riverfront.
 - Safety in vehicles.
5. The preferred ways to get the messages out are:
 - Newspaper articles.
 - County-wide newsletter.
 - Website with links to other sources.
 - Radio public service announcements

9.7. Recommendations

1. Public information activities should advise people about ways to protect themselves and their properties from natural hazards. They should also cover ways to protect natural features, such as streams and water quality. Special attention should be given to floodplain management issues.

2. County and municipal offices should use their newsletters, cable TV resources, and websites to distribute information. They should also get the mitigation messages out via handouts, brochures, news releases, mass mailings, and presentations to organizations.
3. Each County office and municipality should review their current public information activities and incorporate the messages in them, where appropriate.
4. County and interested municipal staff should initiate discussions with the Association of Realtors to review ways to better inform people of the natural hazards that properties are exposed to.
5. The County should provide an order form for municipalities and local and college libraries to order free state and federal hazard mitigation publications.
6. The County should develop a master list of website links and include it on a county hazards awareness page. Community websites should include local information and link to the County's site.

9.8. References

1. Brochures, flyers, websites, and other Kankakee County public informational materials.
2. *CRS Coordinator's Manual*, Community Rating System, FEMA, 2002.
3. *CRS Credit for Outreach Projects*, Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2002.
4. *Floodproof Retrofitting: Homeowner Self-Protective Behavior*, Shirley Bradway Laska, University of Colorado, 1991.
5. *Guide to Flood Protection in Northeastern Illinois (Homeowner's booklet)*, Illinois Association for Floodplain and Stormwater Management, 1997
6. Municipal and library websites, questionnaires and interviews, Spring 2005.
7. Survey and interviews on local public information programs, Spring, 2005.
8. *Stormwater Management Public Information Resource Guide*, South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association, 1999

A complete list of references recommended for local libraries is found in Section 354 in the *CRS Coordinator's Manual*.

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