

## **Meadowlands still without regional flood plan, one year after Sandy's deluge**

**By S.P. Sullivan, NJ.com** *Published: October 29, 2013*

If Hurricane Sandy were to come back here today, bringing with it that deluge from the Hackensack River, the first responders would rush out just as quickly. The floodwaters would, too.

It's been a year since that tidal surge sent millions of gallons of Atlantic Ocean up into the Meadowlands, overcoming every flood control device by several feet. Today, the district is still without a comprehensive flood plan.

"There's still more that needs to be done," Moonachie Mayor Dennis Vaccaro said on Monday, standing outside a gutted borough hall. Without even getting into long-term flood planning just yet, the towns are still trying to shake off the storm.

"There's rebuilding of the municipal building," Vaccaro said. "There's still about 5 to 7 percent of people in Moonachie that need to get back in their homes. So we still have a lot of things to do."

In the months since the storm, a mounting number of local and state officials have recognized the need to address flooding in the Meadowlands, a perennial local problem that became a major public safety issue when Sandy put thousands of homes underwater. But things are still in the planning stages.

Among the steps that have been taken:

- The Meadowlands Commission, through its research arm, the Meadowlands Environmental Research Institute, published a detailed analysis of what caused the deluge, showing that floodwaters overtopped every berm and tidegate in their path. They also undertook the task of mapping the region's system of earthen berms and ditches, makeshift measures originally built for mosquito control in the early- to mid-20th century. "Over the past year, the Commission has made available the sea surge data that it collected during Superstorm Sandy to numerous local, county, state, and federal officials and agencies," spokesman Brian Aberback wrote in an e-mail to NJ.com. "The NJMC continues to be a technical resource in providing the Superstorm Sandy data to those who request it."
- Many have looked to the commission to improve that infrastructure in the wake of the storm, a massive undertaking that they say they're not mandated to do by the state and don't have the funding to perform. So Sen. Paul Sarlo earlier this year proposed legislation that would expand their mission to include flood control. That measure is still awaiting a vote. "We certainly have had discussions with the executive branch about that, and they seem receptive to it," Chris Eilert, Sarlo's chief of staff, told NJ.com.
- Bergen County Executive Kathleen Donovan hired the county's first-ever flood management and control coordinator, Elizabeth "Betsy" Stagg. Stagg's job includes pulling together all the various players and coordinating efforts to bring in funding for projects.

- The Bergen freeholder board approved Freeholder Steve Tanelli's plan to create its own regional flood task force, which would look at flood control measures from the Meadowlands up to the Pascack Valley. That body is expected to start meeting in November.

The missing variable in all of these approaches, at least for now, is money. Flooding is nothing new in the Meadowlands, but previous attempts at major flood-control projects have proven too costly to undertake.

Decades ago, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers explored the idea of a massive tidal gate near Newark Bay, publishing a reconnaissance report in February 1989. But before tackling massive, expensive projects, the Army Corps performs detailed cost-benefit analyses, and at the time found the project not worth doing.

Now the Army Corps may take up the possibility again, as it conducts a comprehensive study up and down the North Atlantic coast. Approval from the Army Corps for a large-scale tidal barrier or other major infrastructure improvements could bring renewed federal interest, but there still isn't consensus as to whether it's the best thing for the region.

"There's environmental people who say, 'No, no, you have to let the area flood,'" Stagg told NJ.com recently. "Then there's people in the homes down there saying, 'No, no, please don't.'"

Some question whether it would be wise to put large-scale flood control devices in a swamp that eats ambitious projects for breakfast. "I get a little antsy when people bring up those kinds of fixes," Bill Sheehan, head of the Hackensack Riverkeeper, told NJ.com when asked about the previous Army Corps studies. "When the river decides it's coming, no amount of engineering is going to stop it."

The problem is also being looked at by a consortium of New Jersey-based colleges and universities, working under grants from the state Department of Environmental Protection. Three schools—Rutgers, NJIT and Montclair State University—are examining the Meadowlands problem from different angles.

Those studies will include not just large, "hard" structures like flood walls and barriers, but also "soft" approaches favored by environmentalists and even "non-structural solutions" like changes in policy and regulation, according to Qizhong (George) Guo, a civil and environmental engineering professor at Rutgers and one of the researchers on the project.

"We want to look at the full spectrum of solution," Guo said. "We don't want to miss anything."

Little Ferry Mayor Mauro Raguseo spent months after the storm trying to get state and federal officials to look at big projects like a movable flood barrier near Newark Bay. "I'm still a big proponent of it," he told NJ.com. "I still believe it's the only thing that could have stopped Sandy, but we need to get other projects done as well."

Raguseo says it's wise to wait for the results of a comprehensive study before putting millions of taxpayers dollars into flood control projects—but that the state needs to be quick to act on their recommendations.

"When the studies are done, they can't sit on a shelf anymore. We actually have to implement what they're suggesting," the mayor said. "And we're going to need the federal resources and the state resources to get it done."

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