

Continuing to fight battle vs. flooding

Hurricane Irene Aftermath By Michelle Gladden, Staff Writer *Home News Tribune* | Thursday, November 17, 2011

When Hurricane Irene bombarded the region in late August, it left many communities struggling to keep their heads above water. For some people, Irene's wrath was a rare battle with storm damage. But for those people who live in low-lying areas, the storm only exacerbated an ongoing battle with flooding. And it's a fight they are losing.

"Every time there is a bad storm, we run the risk of our street flooding," said Fran O'Connor, whose Weber Avenue home in Sayreville has endured six major floods during her 14 years there. "Whenever there is a bad storm predicted we move our cars to higher elevation and start going into flood protection mode. We move things out of the basement, move furniture up from the first level to the second level, but we can't move our furnaces, hot water heaters and, in most cases, our washer and dryers."

Though millions in state and federal dollars have been appropriated for flood-risk management projects throughout New Jersey, they typically take a decade or more to bring to fruition. And with forecasters predicting the effects of climate change could lead to more severe storms, thousands are seeking immediate relief from repeated and costly repairs.

O'Connor said she and her husband, Michael, had yet to pay off the thousands of dollars spent to replace furniture, a furnace, a hot water heater and a washer and dryer that they purchased after their home was flooded 18 months ago. "If it weren't for contractors (working in good faith), we would still be without heat, without walls, without doors and without electricity," Fran O'Connor said. "We pay over \$2,000 in flood insurance, and our deductible already went up to \$4,000 after the March (2010) flood."

This is a sentiment shared by residents throughout the region including people who once called Ocean Township's Poplar Village home. Despite the damage caused by Irene, Poplar was a community where 32 homes had already been condemned from flood damage. "I've lost everything," said 81-year-old resident Barbara Collins. "I've lost my electronics, my (antique) furniture and bed."

Last year, about \$107.9 million was paid out in flood insurance claims in New Jersey. In the United States, that was second only to the \$221.2 million paid out to Tennessee. New Jersey also ranked second in the country in the number of claims paid out—6,420 to the 6,843 awarded in Virginia, said Loretta Worters, vice president of the Insurance Information Institute in New York.

"We are seeing more frequent storms that result in increased flooding," Worters said. "Unfortunately, a lot of people living in flood-prone areas still aren't purchasing flood insurance. People keep thinking, 'It's not going to happen to me' or 'It happened once, it won't happen again.'"

But the O'Connors said they were required to purchase flood insurance because their home—about one mile from South River—is in a 100-year flood plain zone. The 100-year designation signifies how often a flood of a large magnitude is expected to occur. But 14 years and six floods later, they are questioning the once-every-100-year flood designation.

Since March, five national disaster declarations were issued for areas in Middlesex, Morris, Monmouth, Ocean and Somerset counties. Rainfall totals here have broken a record. The 49.24 inches of rain in New Jersey thus far has surpassed the previous record of 48.43 inches that fell from January to September in 1975.

Kenneth Miller, vice chairman of Rutgers University's Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences, said global warming, the increase in the earth's temperature, has sea levels rising by 30 to 40 centimeters annually as the region's land sinks exponentially. "Every time a heavy rainfall occurs over a few hours or days and is combined with a tidal cycle, that's when you get floods," Miller said.

Ursula Kecse-Farkas, executive director at Poplar Village, said they intended to refurbish homes and move residents back into the community after an early-August flood. But once Irene arrived, the majority of the senior citizens, who were again evacuated, lost their homes. Now only 38 of the nearly 100 residents remain.

The light at the end of the tunnel could be flood risk management projects planned by the Army Corps of Engineers that involve everything from building levees, floodgates and berms to acquiring homes in flood-prone areas, such as the \$4.46 million dedicated to rebuilding the condemned Poplar Village homes on higher ground.

"Having to recover from the back-to-back storms that have occurred has been a challenge for New Jersey residents," said William L. Vogel, coordinating officer for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Through FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant program, the agency awarded \$48.3 million for the acquisition of 217 properties in 10 communities, including the Poplar Village homes. But acquisition, while an immediate remedy, might not be the best solution in the long run, said Qizhong "George" Guo, a civil and environmental engineering professor at Rutgers.

Guo said the focus should be on the larger scope of not generating too much stormwater runoff by implementing changes to infrastructure designs. A more prudent temporary fix would be to retrofit "green" infrastructure to properties designed prior to the more stringent 2004 guidelines, he said.

"The green infrastructure won't solve the 100-year flood problem, but it will solve the one-and two-year floods," Guo said. "People should not get flooded every two years. We cannot do much about the rainfall because it's only getting worse with extreme patterns, and sea levels are rising."

Aside from the housing acquisition at Poplar Village, a \$6-million Corps of Engineers project aims to fix the community and the surrounding area's recurring flood problems by constructing a levee, clearing Poplar Brook and elevating Whale Pond Road. Across the state, the Corps of Engineers has more than 30 flood risk management and coastal storm damage reduction projects under way.

For the O'Connors, a planned Corps of Engineers project is still too far away. Like communities along the Shore such as Aberdeen, Highlands, Mantoloking and Seaside Park, the O'Connors are engaged in addressing flood problems immediately at the local level. The couple said they believed a planned Corps of Engineers project would provide the needed storm surge barriers along South River to mitigate their problem.

"We're trying to get the Army Corps of Engineers project to move faster, but in the meantime we've come up with a more immediate flood project," she said of a Sayreville group looking to rehab and upgrade their pumping station for an estimated \$10 million. The community will borrow \$300,000 for the interim project, and Fran O'Connor said they are trying to ensure the smaller project lines up with the federal plans.

"It's been a severe financial burden to us," Michael O'Connor said of the structural damage to their home. "I don't know if we can sustain another flood."

Michelle Gladden: 732-557-5733; mgladden@njpressmedia.com

Sidebar: Projects

The Army Corps of Engineers flood-risk management projects, with estimated costs, include:

- **Green Brook Sub Station:** 65 square miles in 13 municipalities throughout Middlesex, Somerset and Union counties; \$362 million.
- **Jackson Brook:** 4.7 miles in four Morris County towns; cost unknown (awaiting final project report).
- **Malapardis Brook:** 500-foot stream bank restoration in Morris County's Hanover Township; \$1 million.
- **Mill Brook:** at Highland Park in Middlesex County, a 175-foot-long culvert; \$3 million.
- **Millstone River Basin:** 238 miles throughout Mercer, Middlesex, Monmouth, Hunterdon and Somerset counties; \$18 million.
- **Poplar Brook:** in Monmouth County's Deal and Ocean Township; \$4.4 million.
- **Shrewsbury River:** in Monmouth County's Monmouth Beach; \$12.9 million.
- **South Branch Rahway River:** along Garden State Parkway from milepost 130.5 to 132.7 in Middlesex County; \$300,000.
- **South River:** four Middlesex County towns; \$124.1 million.

- **Upper Passaic River:** in Morris County's Long Hill Township; \$5.1 million (local concerns have delayed project).
- **Upper Rockaway River:** eight towns primarily throughout Morris County; \$2.6 million (project suspended).
- **Woodbridge River Basin:** 10 miles in Morris County; \$22.9 million (determined not economically justified).

The Corps of Engineers coastal storm damage reduction projects have been vetted for Highlands, Keansburg, Keyport, Port Monmouth and Union Beach. They include adding levees, flood walls, tide gates, pump stations, dunes and beach berms. A 21-mile beach replenishment project extending from Sea Bright to Manasquan was completed in March 2009 at a cost of \$210 million.

In July, the state-Office of Emergency Management in conjunction with the state Department of Environmental Protection announced \$48.3 million in Hazard Mitigation Grant Program funds were approved for flood protection projects, representing nearly double the total amount received in the 14 years prior to 2009.

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HURRICANE IRENE AFTERMATH

Continuing to fight battle vs. flooding



Fran O'Connor points to where water levels during Hurricane Irene reached in the split-level living room of her Sayreville home, about 5 feet above her front door walkway. Her first-floor den, garage and basement were completely submerged. AUGUSTO F. MENEZES/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

By Michelle Gladden
Staff Writer

When Hurricane Irene bombarded the region in late August, it left many residents struggling to keep their heads above water.

For some people, Irene's wrath was a rare battle with storm damage. But for those people who live in low-lying areas, the storm only exacerbated an ongoing battle with flooding.

And it's a fight they are losing.

"Every time there is a bad storm, we run the risk of our house flooding," said Fran O'Connor, whose West Avenue home in Sayreville has endured six major floods during her 14 years there. "Whenever there is a bad storm predicted, we move our cars to higher elevation and start going into flood protection mode. We move things out of the basement, move furniture up from the first level to the second level, but we can't move our furnaces, hot water heaters and, in most cases, our washer and dryer."

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DISASTER AID

Federal disaster assistance to the state reached \$242 million this week. As of Tuesday, more than \$155.5 million in FEMA disaster relief in housing and other needs assistance was approved for 47,065 state residents affected by Hurricane Irene. The number of residents approved, by counties in the region, are:

Hunterdon: 1,264
Middlesex: 7,132
Monmouth: 6,354
Morris: 5,619
Ocean: 1,056
Union: 8,129
Somerset: 4,567

The disaster assistance request deadline has been extended to Nov. 30. For more information, visit www.disasterassistance.gov (m.fema.gov via smartphones) or call 800-621-3362.

sands of dollars spent to replace furniture, a furnace, a hot water heater and a washer and dryer that they purchased after their home was flooded 18 months ago.

"If it weren't for contractors (working in good faith), we would still be without a roof, walls, windows, doors and without clean water," Fran O'Connor said. "We pay over \$2,000 in flood insurance, and our deductible already went up to \$4,000 after the March (2010) flood."

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my electronics, my (antique) furniture and bed."

Last year, about \$107.9 million was paid out in flood insurance claims in New Jersey. In the United States, that was second only to the \$221.2 million paid out in Tennessee. New Jersey also paid out second in the nation in the number of claims paid out — 6,430 — to the 6,843 awarded in Virginia, said Loretta Winters, vice president of the Insurance Information Institute in New York.

"We are seeing more frequent storms that result in increased flooding," Winters said. "Unfortunately, a lot of people living in flood-prone areas still aren't purchasing flood insurance. People keep thinking, 'It's not going to happen to me' or 'It happened once, it won't happen

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POLITICS FIXING ECONOMY

Congress OKs jobs bill for veterans, contractors

By Alan Fram
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Democrats and Republicans rallied on a rare patch of common ground Wednesday and Congress approved legislation helping government contractors and unemployed veterans, finally giving President Barack Obama the chance to sign the first, tiny shred of his \$447 billion jobs bill into law.

The House passed the measure in the White House by an overwhelming 422-0, six days after the Senate passed it 95-0.

The legislation creates tax breaks for companies hiring jobless veterans — a part of Obama's jobs plan — and beefs up vets' job-training and counseling programs.

It also repeals a 2006 law that would require the federal, state and local governments to withhold 3 percent of their payments to contractors. That statute, which doesn't take effect until 2013, was supposed to pressure contractors to fully pay their taxes, but lawmakers now say the withholding would deny cash to companies that they could better use to hire more workers.

Obama's signature would let him and lawmakers claim credit for protecting jobs at a time when the public is clearly

See JOBS BILL, Page A2

CRIME HEADED TO JAIL

Cops: Man escapes police car

Found hours later, with handcuff key

By Mark Spivey
Staff Writer

SOMERVILLE — A man being transported to Somerset County Jail by Montgomery Police Tuesday night managed to kick out the back window of a patrol car and escape, staying on the lam for about six hours before being recaptured in Rocky Hill, authorities said Wednesday.

Kevyn Slovensky, 31, of East Windsor was charged with third-degree escape and third-degree criminal mischief, according to the Somerset County Prosecutor's Office.

Officers earlier on Tuesday had responded to the East Windsor Police Department in Mercer County to pick up Slovensky, who was wanted on a Montgomery Township traffic warrant, authorities said. But Slovensky, who had been handcuffed prior to transport, made his move a little after 7 p.m. when the officer's patrol car was stopped at the intersection of Route 518 and Crescent

See ESCAPE, Page A2

From Page One**IRENE**

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MORE ONLINE
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