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## **In Westchester and Rockland, flood prevention plans wallow as costs rise**

For at least seven decades, flooding has been a known problem in the Lower Hudson Valley.

Studies have been followed by plans and meetings and patchwork projects.

Yet when Tropical Storm Irene roared through the region a week ago, once again people from Mamaroneck to Suffern found their neighborhoods turned into lakes, their basements into creeks.

"There's a problem here," said Robert Georgio, a Rye businessman whose high-end kitchens and homes showroom suffered \$300,000 of damage when the Blind Brook spilled its banks. "Get some engineering done. Get a budget going. And do something about it."

Georgio's reaction is one that has echoed throughout the valley after storms of years past. Implementing solutions has proved harder than identifying problems. A regional approach – rather than a piecemeal effort – has been slow to emerge. And potential costs have risen higher than floodwaters and have often engulfed calls to action.

In the wake of an April 2007 nor'easter that swamped the region, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers undertook a preliminary study of Westchester's flood problems as a whole. The completed study, called a reconnaissance report, recommended six further feasibility studies in Westchester to look at potential solutions for flooding from six streams and the Long Island Sound shore.

The 2008 report warned that flooding problems associated with the Hutchinson, Bronx, Saw Mill, Mamaroneck and Sheldrake rivers, in addition to the Blind Brook and the shore of eastern Westchester, were only likely to get worse if they weren't addressed.

"In the absence of federal action, it is likely the flood damages will occur again, possibly increasing in frequency and intensity, endangering the lives of residents and impairing the function of municipalities," the report said.

The report estimated the cost of the feasibility studies in Westchester at \$15 million. The state Department of Environmental Conservation, which is required by New York to be the non-federal partner in flood management projects, has to secure the funding for 50 percent of any further studies.

Three years later, only one of the recommended studies is under way.

The one study that has started, a look at the problems of the Mamaroneck and Sheldrake rivers, actually grew out of a study in the 1970s and 1980s that the Army Corps did. That study recommended a series of levees and a tunnel to divert water into the Long Island Sound. But it was rejected because of its projected \$64 million price tag.

The Army Corp's preliminary study was completed in early 2008, right at the start of an economic downturn that spiraled with increasing speed and depth.

A spokesman for Rep. Nita Lowey, D-Harrison, who secured the federal funding for the current Mamaroneck-Sheldrake study, said the state's budget problems explain the lack of action.

"It's understandable that it is difficult in these times to find a non-federal match," said Matthew Dennis, Lowey's spokesman. "Just like the federal government is under budget pressure and financial strain, state, county and municipal governments are facing similar strains and are encountering similar problems."

A DEC spokesman referenced the budget constraints in a statement, saying the department "regularly evaluates flood risk and plans mitigation efforts as resources allow."

The Army Corps is working on two projects in Westchester County.

One is a boulder tow project to stabilize the banks of the Bronx River near the Westchester County Center in White Plains. Three 1.5-ton boulders are being placed along the bank of the river over 1,000 feet. The \$1.5 million project was funded through federal stimulus funds. The project should be finished this winter.

Another project is shoring up the stream bank of the Bronx River near Yonkers Avenue in Tuckahoe, which includes a concrete retaining wall and adding steel sheeting and pipe piles embedded in the bedrock along 350 feet of the river. The \$2.5 million project's start is imminent and should be finished by spring 2012, said Karen Ashton, a project planner with the Army Corps.

### **Westchester's woes**

Westchester's flooding problems stem from development and the nature of its streams, Ashton said.

"You're in a highly urbanized area. It's very dense and you don't have a lot of pervious surface for the water to percolate down," she said. "The channels tend to be narrow and not very deep, so they don't have a lot of capacity."

That's why Westchester is more prone to the sort of flash flooding that occurs during storms than flooding that occurs days after the storm, as is the case with some rivers in New Jersey, such as the Passaic, a much deeper and wider river than any of the Westchester streams, she said. The Passaic has a basin of about 935 square miles compared with the Mamaroneck-Sheldrake basin of less than 25 square miles, she said.

What the Village of Mamaroneck needs from the Army Corps' current study are plans that are workable, Assistant Village Manager Dan Sarnoff said.

"Ultimately, one of the important things that we're going to need from this report are projects that are affordable and that can realistically be funded and completed," he said.

Rye Mayor Douglas French said the city has about \$15 million worth of proposed projects to alleviate flooding. But, he said, enforcing water retention requirements in developments upstream from Rye was essential.

"While these projects are costly," he said of proposals for work on the Bowman Avenue Dam and a retention pond at Purchase College, "the total cost does not come close to the amount of past loss and potential future loss with recurring flooding."

The Army Corps began studying the Saw Mill River Basin in 1942, and later studies led to flood control projects in Yonkers and Ardsley.

But the Army Corps' plans for a nearly 3-mile stretch of the river in Greenburgh and Elmsford beginning in 1974 have languished for decades – and each time the price rises, there is no federal funding available.

The Army Corps indicated it could not re-evaluate the Saw Mill study because no state funding was available.

Greenburgh Supervisor Paul Feiner said the town has all but given up on the Army Corps and a major fix to the problem and is now looking for consultants who can come up with innovative ways that Greenburgh can do something. It's a difficult prospect because most work requires permits from the Army Corps and the DEC.

"Unless they spend many, many millions, the best we'll be able to do is handle the little storms," Feiner said.

Karl Pfeiffer, a resident of Babbitt Court in Elmsford, has lived with the Saw Mill River in his backyard for more than 40 years. After Hurricane Floyd in 1999, he spent \$70,000 to elevate his house – and FEMA began kicking in 75 percent of the cost for his neighbors to do the same a few years later.

Cleaning the debris on Monday convinced him that it might be time to give up and move elsewhere.

"It just gets monotonous. You don't want any more talk; you don't want any more politicians on your back deck taking pictures with the water behind them," Pfeiffer said.

Ed Burroughs, the Westchester County planning commissioner, said he understands the frustration along Route 9A. But simply dredging a one-mile section there could wreak havoc further downstream on other flood mitigation efforts.

"It's not an excuse. It's just that you can't do it piecemeal," Burroughs said.

And as federal funding cannot be relied upon, Westchester is working on smaller projects as it seeks to get a handle on the big picture.

In 2007, the county set aside \$50 million to help local communities share the cost of their flood mitigation projects. Four projects totaling \$8.4 million – in Mamaroneck town, Rye/Rye Brook, Scarsdale and Tarrytown – were approved, with the county's share nearly \$4.4 million. Two others, in Larchmont and New Rochelle, are pending. The Mamaroneck project, dredging Gardens Lake and installing a drainage system in the dam there, was completed this summer.

One condition for the municipalities to get county funding is that they must have a law in place requiring any new development to catch its own stormwater.

### **Efforts in Rockland**

In Westchester and Rockland, flood prevention plans wallow as costs rise

It was a familiar story in Rockland, where the same neighborhoods that have flooded in the past – such as the Lake DeForest Reservoir in West Nyack and Squires Gate in Suffern – were overwhelmed by Irene despite years of studies.

County Executive C. Scott Vanderhoef wants a Rockland Bergen Bi-State River Commission, which would include officials from Rockland and Bergen County, N.J., as well as state environmental agencies, to study the rivers they share, including the Hackensack, Mahwah, Ramapo, Saddle and Sparkill.

The Army Corps of Engineers has talked about making the Hackensack 10 feet deeper and 20 feet wider – but it's still just talk.

Ramapo pitched a plan to use the closed, town-owned Suffern Quarry as a floodwater runoff basin, but Supervisor Christopher St. Lawrence said that wouldn't help Squire's Gate.

"When the dust settles, we're going to have some very hard discussions about every option because for the first time ... there are people saying they don't want to return," Suffern Mayor Dagan LaCorte said.

**Caption:** Water remains on Klein Avenue in West Nyack the day after flooding caused by Irene. The street is in a flood-prone area, downhill from the Lake DeForest dam.

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