

Revised Broome County Flood Maps Background

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has been updating flood maps nationwide since 2003. Almost two-thirds of Broome County's flood hazards maps are more than 30 years old and no longer accurately reflect the county's risk for flooding. Storms in the region in 2006 underscored the need for updated flood maps. Changing topography, urban development and sprawl, loss of vegetation and an increase in impervious surface, as well as a longer record of flooding experience, all result in an increase in floodable areas.

FEMA has now completed a set of updated flood maps for Broome County. These preliminary digital flood insurance rate maps (DFIRMs) will be submitted to local officials for their review on about February 1, 2010. The new maps indicate that 12 sections of the county's levees no longer meet federal requirements for minimum flood protection. Because of this, structures on the other side of the levees will be designated as being in a "Special Flood Hazard Area." According to the new maps, approximately 8,000 structures are located in the flood zone, and consequently, flood insurance for these owners will be required if the structures carry a federally backed or federally regulated mortgage. The communities most affected by this are the city of Binghamton, the villages of Endicott and Johnson City and the towns of Vestal and Union.

It is important to note the new maps do *not* indicate that the levees are predicted to *fail*. The levees did their job during the 2006 flood. Rather, the levees do not meet federal requirements for flood protection because they do not extend three feet above (higher than) the base flood elevation (base flood elevation is the level that water is anticipated to rise to during a one-hundred year flood). This phenomenon is referred to as "freeboard." Levees without three feet of "freeboard" do not meet federal requirements and the structures behind them are considered to be in a flood zone. For example, if the base flood elevation in a given location is 1070 feet and the levee at that spot is 1073 feet, sufficient freeboard exists and structures behind the levee are not considered to be in a flood hazard area. If the levee is at 1071 feet, there would be insufficient freeboard, and structures behind it would be considered in the flood hazard area. This is the case with some of the levees in the greater Binghamton area.

Persons within the flood hazard areas will need to purchase flood insurance which is subsidized through the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP). NFIP offers flood insurance to homeowners, renters and business owners if their community participates in the NFIP. Nearly 90 private insurance companies and independent insurance agents offer flood insurance through this program. Rates are set by the government and do not differ from company to company or agent to agent.

Being in a Special Flood Hazard Area requires flood insurance for all structures with a federally-backed or federally regulated mortgage. As insurance premiums are linked to risk, even structures that currently have flood insurance will see an increase in their premiums if the structure is located in a newly defined flood hazard area.

Property owners can save money on flood insurance by purchasing a policy before the new flood maps go into effect (during 2010 when maps are still deemed preliminary and under review) and keeping it in effect. Persons who do this will be charged the same as those properties deemed to be in "moderate-risk zones," even after the new maps go into effect. Owners will be "grandfathered in" at these more favorable rates. Until the new maps become effective, many property owners can save even more by purchasing the lowest-cost flood insurance, a Preferred Risk Policy. At renewal of the policy it will convert to the rates for a moderate-risk zone, which is still much lower than rates for a high-risk zone.

Floods are the most common form of natural disaster. Eighty percent of all Presidentially-declared disasters involve flooding. Homes located in a high-risk flood zone have a 26 percent chance of flooding during the life of a 30-year mortgage versus a five percent chance of having a fire. Broome County's new flood maps are more accurate, assisting residents in identifying new flood zone locations. The maps will provide residents with the ability to protect their homes and possessions through mitigation efforts, such as flood insurance, which is excluded from standard homeowners' insurance policies.