

LOOK UPSTREAM

JANUARY 2006

The Revised FEMA Maps: We Can Do Better!

An Important Update from the Cypress Creek Flood Control Coalition

How does our government (Harris County and Federal) job performance measure up while carrying out its duty to protect citizens and their homes from damage, loss of value, heart-break and risk of death which follow in the path of catastrophic storm water flooding? Is this performance which directly affects neighborhoods in the Cypress Creek watershed above, at, or below par? The answer, unfortunately, is that "it needs improvement".

Among the greatest government responsibilities which are needed within Harris County to protect our homes and families is the responsibility of determining the locations and depths where flooding will occur during major storms. Using this information the county, city and state government must then regulate urban land development within such zones to: 1) prohibit man-made changes in the natural flood plain landscape which would worsen flood conditions and, 2) acquire land and construct regional detention basins needed in order to reduce the peak elevation of flood waters flowing toward downstream subdivisions by capturing runoff at its source and then controlling it through slower release methods. The growing threats and probability of losses if this is not done properly is magnified immensely by rapidly growing urban development in the northwestern sector of the watershed. It is impossible for individual citizens to do this on their own.

Federal regulations require FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) to release their flood maps for public review and comment prior to being finalized for use in flood damage reduction actions. Engineering consultant evaluation – consultation paid from donations made to the Cypress Creek Flood Control Coalition (CCFCC) – determined inaccuracies exist in data contained in the computer models used by FEMA to create the recent new flood plain maps of the Cypress Creek watershed. An appeal seeking correction of the maps prior to publication was filed last March. Among other deficiencies, this appeal pointed out that at one critical location in the upper watershed, FEMA's preliminary maps understate the floodplain by some 4 to 5 feet. (Additional appeals were filed by other non-government organizations.) If the maps are finalized without correction, subsequent permits issued by Harris County for new land development will allow land fill to be made – which would otherwise be prohibited – resulting in increased runoff and flooding downstream. Nevertheless, the appeal was denied by FEMA in a letter sent to Judge Robert Eckels on December 5th. While acknowledging their review of our appeal and the corresponding data, they still concluded that, "*revision*[of the maps] *is not warranted*."

Because denial of the appeal creates significant adverse ramifications contrary to the government's duty to protect, CCFCC has notified Harris County Flood Control District (HCFCD) and FEMA that their denial is inappropriate and unacceptable. Actions during the Christmas holidays established through a blitz of telephone calls, e-mails and meetings triggered by CCFCC's position that "We can do better" indicate the appeal denial may be dropped. A joint investigation shared by HCFCD and CCFCC management to achieve a better end result is underway at the time this article is written. We expect to have results of this undertaking available for you by the time our annual membership meeting is held on Wednesday, March 15, 2006. Mark this date on your calendar. Please plan to attend.

Note: Coincidentally, an Associated Press news article reported a Homeland Security Department internal inspector general report issued December 28 states that among other problems noted in their review of FEMA performance, "*modernizing flood plain maps is inadequate*".

This *Look Upstream* article is one in a series published as a public service in the neighborhood news letters of communities served by the Cypress Creek Flood Control Coalition's municipal utility district and home owner association members.. For more information visit their web site, www.ccfcc.org or e-mail floodalliance@ccfcc.org.

