

**COMPLETE STATEMENT  
OF  
Thomas Blaskiewicz  
Mayor  
West Pittston Borough, Pennsylvania**

**BEFORE  
SENATE ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES & ENERGY COMMITTEE  
PENNSYLVANIA STATE SENATE  
ON  
FLOODING AND EMERGENCY RESPONSE**

**APRIL 25, 2018**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, good morning. My name is Thomas Blaskiewicz and I am the Mayor of West Pittston Borough. Thank you for the opportunity to provide my insights into impacts to the Borough during the Tropical Storm Lee flood event and again in January 2018 when an ice jam occurred on the Susquehanna River.

To provide you with some background, West Pittston Borough is located in the Wyoming Valley in Luzerne County midway between the cities of Wilkes-Barre and Scranton in northeastern Pennsylvania. The Borough is approximately one square mile and the current population is 4,700 residents. The easterly border of the borough, approximately two miles in length, is the Susquehanna River. The Susquehanna River is one of the most flood-prone rivers in the United States.

The majority of the Wyoming Valley is protected by a federal flood damage reduction project. The levees were originally constructed in the 1930's and 1940's. The levees were overtapped in 1972 by the remnants of Tropical Storm Agnes. At that time, it was the largest national disaster in the country's history. In the late 1990's and early 2000's the federal government, with financial participation from the Commonwealth and Luzerne County, raised the existing levee system. However, low lying communities, including West Pittston, remained unprotected. Major storms in 1996, 2004 and 2006 caused flooding in the Borough and the other unprotected municipalities.

### **TROPICAL STORM LEE - SEPTEMBER 2011**

In September 2011 heavy rainfall from Tropical Strom Lee caused the Susquehanna River to reach 42.66 feet, the new flood of record in Wilkes-Barre. The height surpassed the previous record flood set in 1972 by nearly two feet.

The Wyoming Valley Levee System prevented approximately \$5 billion in damages. Unfortunately, not all areas of the Wyoming Valley escaped unharmed. Nearly 3,000 properties in unprotected communities were flooded.

In West Pittston nearly one third of the Borough was

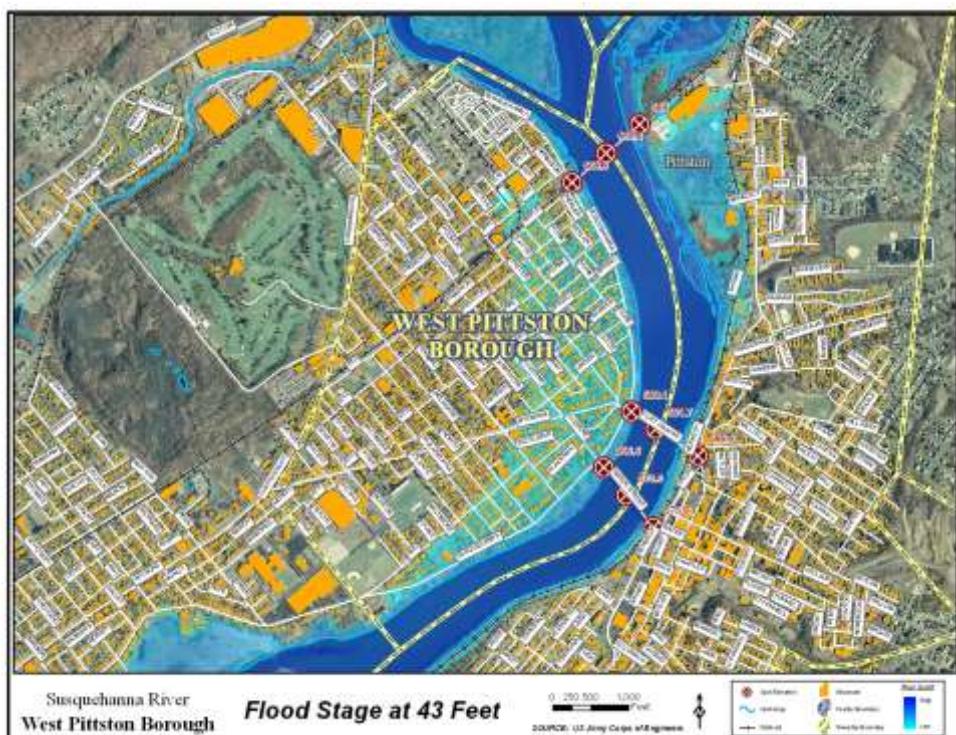


Figure 1 Tropical Storm Lee Flood Inundation West Pittston Borough

flooded. The flooding consisted of 628 properties with basement flooding, 236 properties with first floor flooding and 16 properties with second floor flooding. In addition twenty-six businesses and four churches were flooded. One school was flooded and four other public buildings including the public library sustained damages.

### **JANUARY 2018 ICE JAM**

On January 24, 2018 an ice jam on the Susquehanna River flooded portions of the Borough. The flooded areas were similar to the flood events of 2004 and 2006. While the river gage at Wilkes-Barre crested at around 22 feet, West Pittston was experiencing flooding as if a flood event of 35 feet was occurring.

Uncertainty regarding when the ice jam might break, where it would break, what areas would be inundated, the size of the ice blocks, and the possible loss of power and heat forced officials to evacuate a portion of the Borough for the overnight hours of January 24. During the evening hours, the ice jam broke and the Borough was spared from widespread flooding.



Figure 2 Susquehanna River January 25, 2018

### **LESSONS LEARNED-TROPICAL STORM LEE**

#### **Post Event - Unprotected Communities**

Pennsylvania is one of the most flood prone states in the country. Pennsylvania consists of 67 counties with nearly 2,600 municipalities. Floodplain management responsibilities under the National Flood Insurance Program fall to the municipalities. In Luzerne County, there are 76 municipalities. Many of the communities are staffed by one person that handles all administrative functions. Typically salaries are low and turnover is high. Most do not have the technical expertise or training to properly administer the flood insurance program.

Major flood events are infrequent and the small municipalities are paralyzed immediately following an event. It is at this point that FEMA and PEMA assistance is most critical as municipal leaders are bombarded with questions regarding flood recovery. Whether there is a presidential disaster declaration or not, FEMA and PEMA should immediately contact municipalities by phone or email and remind them of their responsibilities to enforce the requirements of the flood insurance program.

Following the Lee Flood event, FEMA held video training or webinars to educate municipal officials regarding best practices following a flood event to meet the requirements of the National Flood Insurance Program. Unfortunately, the frequency of the training opportunities has decreased in the last several years.

Failure to involve county officials in the recovery effort is an error. County staff could act as the liaison between FEMA, PEMA and the affected municipalities and allow for a consistent message to be presented. Counties have better capacity to provide technical assistance to local communities.

PEMA managed the FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant Program after the Lee Flood. The Agency did an excellent job in removing substantially damaged and destroyed properties from the flood plain; however, the process took way too long. A more efficient means of dealing with substantially damaged or destroyed structures must be identified. Property owners that were flooded in September did not know if their property was included for acquisition until the end of January. Individuals damaged by flooding cannot be expected to wait the 1 1/2 to 3 years that a typical Hazard Mitigation Project takes. The delays resulted in many homeowners repairing their homes only to see the properties demolished several years later. A means to expedite the program must be identified so that countless dollars are not spent on homes destined to be demolished.

### **WEST PITTSSTON RECOVERY EFFORTS**

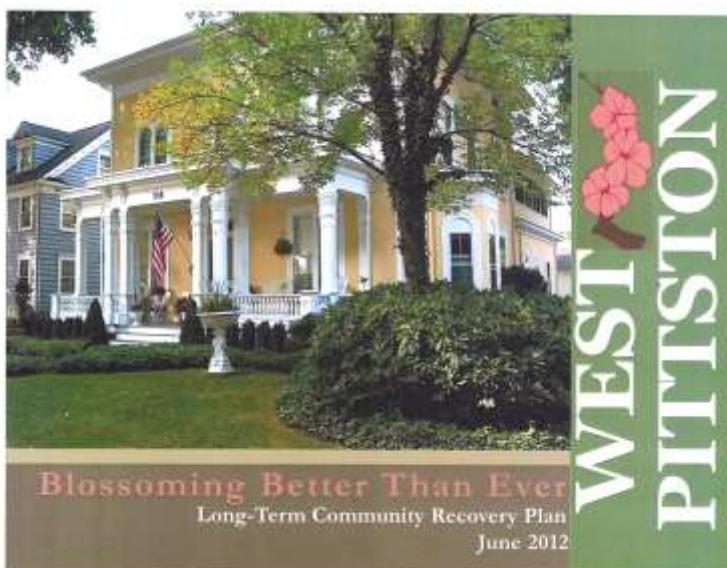


Figure 3 Long-Term Community Recovery Plan June 2012

West Pittston was one of several communities selected following the Tropical Storm Lee flooding to work with the FEMA Long-Term Community Recovery Team to evaluate post flood conditions, plan how to move forward and identify projects that would benefit the community in the future. Borough residents participated in the planning study to develop a long-term recovery plan. Volunteers formed sub-committees that focused on six areas: Natural and Cultural Resources, Housing, Business

Development, Outreach and Communication, Safety and Infrastructure. *West Pittston Tomorrow* grew out of the study and remains active in its mission “*Preserving yesterday. Rebuilding today. Sculpting tomorrow.*”

The Borough participated in the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program and acquired and demolished twelve properties. Two additional properties were acquired and demolished under the non-Disaster HMGP program.

Additionally, the Borough is participating in the Luzerne County CDBG-DR Program and has acquired an additional ten properties with several more active in the program.

West Pittston requested the Army Corps of Engineers investigate a structural flood risk reduction project. A 205 Study was completed by the Corps in 2016. The Corps proposed an earthen levee/floodwall that would range from three to twelve feet in height and be approximately two miles in length along Susquehanna Avenue. The project would provide protection against a reoccurrence of Tropical Storm Lee and had an estimated project cost of 51 million dollars (2016 dollars). The Benefit/Cost ratio was 0.37 and the Corps recommended that the study not move forward.

West Pittston Borough is working with the Luzerne County Flood Protection Authority to implement non-structural projects to make the Borough more resilient to flooding. The projects include completing an application for the Borough to become part of the Community Rating System (CRS) Program; conducting an inventory of flood plain properties to develop appropriate flood damage reduction strategies and elevating Repetitive Loss/Severe Repetitive Loss properties that are located within the proposed historic district of the Borough.

The January ice jam on the Susquehanna River event brought back memories of the historic flooding in 2011 and caused many residents to question if West Pittston is the proper place to call home. The frequency and the intensity of flood events since 2004 requires that the Borough continue to advance its Long Term Recovery efforts.

The Borough realizes that the possibility of a Corps built flood damage reduction project is highly unlikely and that Corps projects take decades to complete. West Pittston has followed the success of the Town of Bloomsburg in completing a flood damage reduction project from inception to the completion of construction in less than three years. The Borough believes that it is important to move forward and investigate alternative structural solutions to protect its residents.

In February 2018, West Pittston received \$200,000 in CDBG-DR planning funds to complete a feasibility study for a non-federal flood damage reduction project. The detailed study, which can be completed within six months, will position the Borough favorably for possible future infrastructure funding.

## **CONCLUSION**

West Pittston was the hardest hit community in Luzerne County by the flooding that occurred in 2011. Nearly nine hundred structures (approximately one-third of the Borough) were flooded during Tropical Storm Lee and damages were estimated at 97.9 million dollars.

In the Wyoming Valley, West Pittston is unlike any of the other communities that are not protected by the levee system. West Pittston has no vacant land to expand its tax base. Exacerbating the problem is the loss of tax revenue from properties acquired through the various federal programs that preclude any development on parcels following acquisition. Additionally, the threat of flooding is depressing real estate values of the properties located in the flood plain.

Once you add in the impacts of skyrocketing flood insurance rates, the situation is bleak for river communities. Pennsylvania needs to develop a comprehensive approach that balances structural projects with mitigation activities. New approaches, similar to the options studied by Lycoming County and the Corps of Engineers in 2016, need to become part of the toolbox for existing in the floodplain.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide my comments on flooding and emergency preparedness. Federal and state officials need to have a better understanding of the challenges facing local governments as the agencies evaluate modifications to their programs.

This concludes my testimony. Again, thank you for this opportunity. I hope that our actions today lead to a more efficient response for the next disaster. If you have any questions, I would be pleased to answer.