THE YEAR OF THE RIVER

Long before the floodwaters arrived, Cedar Rapids had designated 2008 as “The Year of the River” to celebrate the city’s connection to the Cedar River. The slogan also commemorated the 100th anniversary of the city’s purchase of May’s Island, a downtown, midchannel slice of land about the size and shape of a battleship. But the phrase quickly took on a new meaning after the river crested at over 31 feet above flood stage — and more than 11 feet above the previous record of 19.66 feet set in 1961. About 60 percent of Iowa’s total 2008 flood damage occurred in Cedar Rapids.

Cedar Rapids is an industrial city founded on a floodplain. It is also Iowa’s second-largest metropolitan area with a 2008 population of about 125,000. It has no upstream flood protection. Much of its manufacturing and chemical industries, governmental and public buildings, and historic residential and commercial neighborhoods are low-lying. Depending on their location, they were either unprotected from flooding in 2008 or shielded by a patchwork of modest levees that were often overtopped.

INCREDBILE DAMAGE

The city had flooded several times in its history. But, to almost everyone’s shock and disbelief, in 2008, waters inundated areas that had never flooded before — at least not since the city had been built. A combination of local flash flooding and a river crest that cascaded down the entire watershed caused waters to rise quickly, with little warning, and to subside nearly as fast.

The waters ripped through downtown, flowed over levees, and inundated neighborhoods that had stood for well over a century and were thought safe. The 31-foot surge of water carried with it a toxic stew of sewage, agricultural chemicals, mold, bacteria and, at times, fast-moving debris such as tree trunks, dumpsters, even semitrailers. Water raged well outside of the 500-year floodplain. Some neighborhoods were flooded to the rooftops.

Rising Above the Waters is a documentary of the floods of 2008 produced by KGAN-TV in Cedar Rapids. In it, U.S. Representative Bruce Braley said, “One of the most vivid memories I have was flying down the Cedar River from the Waterloo airport to the Cedar Rapids airport and seeing from the air the devastation all along the river and particularly the overwhelming devastation to downtown Cedar Rapids.”


Downtown

Of the 132 city blocks that make up Cedar Rapids’ downtown proper, more than 100 were flooded with water up to 12 feet deep. About 450 businesses and 35 of downtown’s 37 restaurants were affected. All 900 downtown residents were evacuated. About 9,000 of the 13,000 people employed in downtown Cedar Rapids had no functioning place to report to work during the flood. Three large manufacturing plants — Quaker Oats, Swiss Valley Farms, and Penford Products — were flooded.

May’s Island

Some of the city’s oldest and largest government buildings — including City Hall and the Linn County Sheriff’s Office and Detention Center — are located there. They were flooded up to the second floor.
CEDAR RAPIDS

The island was the site of a harrowing last-minute evacuation of prisoners just as water began entering the buildings and washing over the bridges. According to Cedar Rapids historian Mark Stoffer Hunter, the water was so deep during the prisoner evacuation, waves caused by the evacuation buses broke store windows downtown.

Oakhill Jackson
Southeast of downtown, this old residential neighborhood lost at least 150 homes to the flood, which also ravaged the city’s landmark Paramount Theatre. Mercy Medical Center, the largest of the city’s two hospitals, was flooded, necessitating the evacuation of 170 patients. The hospital was out of service for 16 days.

New Bohemia
Just south of Oakhill Jackson and across the river from Czech Village, this up-and-coming cultural district was badly damaged. New Bohemia is home to arts organizations, artists’ lofts, shops, restaurants, and historic buildings dating from the city’s Czech settlement, including St. Wenceslaus, a historic, National Czech parish. Some buildings were knocked off their foundations. Other buildings were damaged but stood firm.

Rompot/Cedar Valley
The majority of this small, mostly residential neighborhood at the southeast end of the city flooded. Debris moving downriver from the city center piled up there.

Czech Village
The heart of Cedar Rapids’ large Czech community dating from the 1800s was hit badly in 2008, even though damage from earlier floods there was slight to nonexistent. Many homes were flooded up to the second floor. Twenty-four buildings on 16th Avenue in the heart of the neighborhood’s business district were inundated, their interiors trashed by the force of the current and the polluted water.

The recently completed National Czech & Slovak Museum & Library, located at the river’s edge, was also swamped. This proud landmark was designed to anchor the resurgence of the village as a historic retail and cultural district, and its damage was a heavy symbolic loss. Fortunately, most of its collections were evacuated ahead of the flood, although 20 percent remained in the building and were heavily damaged. The building itself survived and was later moved and elevated. But following the flood, the interior was so badly damaged, skid loaders were used to muck it out. Debris piles outside the building reached up to 20 feet high.

Time Check
North of Czech Village, the historic working-class neighborhood of Time Check — a riverside, dead-flat expanse of older homes behind a modest levee — was perhaps the city’s most-damaged area. The levee was overtopped, and nearly every one of the neighborhood’s hundreds of homes was affected — most beyond salvation.

Many of its residents had lived there for decades, even generations, in a close-knit community of affordable houses. Neither characteristic would be easy to find elsewhere. The emotional pain and financial hardship of displacement was extreme. There was cultural loss as well. The bottom floor of the Mother Mosque of America flooded, destroying artifacts and community space.
CEDAR RAPIDS

Ellis Boat Harbor
North of Time Check, this marina on the Cedar River was home to 100 houseboats. Only 40 survived the flood. The rest floated loose from their moorings, becoming waterborne projectiles the size of small houses that careened down the river at 10 miles per hour. Many piled up on a railroad bridge just north of downtown. Others ended up on streets — and even on porches — in the Time Check neighborhood.

Infrastructure
All of Cedar Rapids’ downtown bridges were closed during the height of the flooding except for the I-380 overpass. Traveling from one side of the river to the other could take hours due to traffic tie-ups because one lane each way was reserved for emergency vehicles.

Two power plants went offline during the flood. Fortunately, the state’s only nuclear power plant, in nearby Palo, continued to operate.

The city’s sewage treatment plant was knocked out of service. Some areas went without electricity and other utilities for weeks, others for months.

All but one of Cedar Rapids’ water wells were put out of commission by the flood, and the city’s fresh water capacity was reduced to 25 percent.

A LONG-LASTING DISASTER
The height, speed, and extent of the flooding caught everyone by surprise. Just 48 hours before the crest, the river had been projected to reach 20 feet. Although the water level started to drop from its 31-foot peak in a matter of hours, the river remained above flood stage in Cedar Rapids for nearly two weeks following the crest.

Because the city lies toward the bottom of the Cedar River watershed, most runoff from a large swath of northeastern Iowa passes through it. Furthermore, much of Cedar Rapids is low and relatively flat, with gentle slopes on all four sides of the river. As the floodwaters rose, the city filled quickly. Heavy rains pummeled the city just before the crest arrived, adding flash flooding to an already swollen river.

The massive volume of water took time to recede. In some neighborhoods, levees that proved too short to keep floodwaters out were too tall to allow the stinking, acrid, mucky water to drain after the crest passed. It was necessary to ship big diesel-powered portable pumps to pump water out. Sometimes the volume of water impounded by the levees was so great that even a battery of pumps running full force barely made a dent in reducing the water level.

No one died, but 423 people were boat-rescued by firefighters and an estimated 10,000 Cedar Rapidians were displaced. Personal losses, business losses, and infrastructure destruction were so massive — and living conditions so primitive in many areas of the city — that flood survivors and media used the phrase “war zone” to describe them. Many flood survivors lived and worked in a state of traumatized disbelief in the weeks and months following.

EYEWITNESS: “Beyond Belief”
Historian Mark Stoffer Hunter documented the flood as it happened. “It was surreal,” he said. “Cedar Rapids as I knew it was disappearing.” Stoffer Hunter loves Cedar Rapids. He has lived in the city all his life and devoted his career to studying its past. He felt a deep, personal connection to its history, its landmarks, and its neighborhoods. By 2008, he had been taking pictures of the city for decades. That included during the flood of 1993, when there was water in the street in front of his apartment. When he first heard that some degree of flooding was again possible in early June of 2008, he said he was excited to take a few more photos of some high water — more as a curiosity than anything else.

He was perhaps better informed than most. “I was very aware of historic flooding,” he said, having pored over old photographs. “Flood Stage is 12 feet. The river crested at 20 feet in 1929 and 1951 and at 19.27 feet in 1993. As of June 9, 2008, it looked like we’d get a crest around the 1993 level or a couple feet higher. And the city was preparing for that level.” Like nearly everyone, including meteorologists and hydrologists, he didn’t expect much damage, if any.
He had no idea that the next set of historic flood photographs in the city’s archives would include his own — or that he would be hired by the city mid-flood to document the worst disaster the city - and Iowa - had ever experienced. Later, as a research historian for Cedar Rapids’ The History Center, he recounted his experiences in the days leading up to, during, and immediately following the flood in a video interview that included selections of his photographs. An edited version of that interview and several of the images he took during the flood are published in print here for the first time.

TUESDAY, JUNE 10: Czech Village Preparations — “I wasn’t really that concerned.”

“On Tuesday, June 10, I heard it might go more than 20 feet. I wasn’t really that concerned. I thought well, it’s going to be a little bit higher than he first thought.

“The night before, I’d helped my wife, Jan [Stoffer, education director at the National Check & Slovak Museum & Library], with flood preparations at the Czech Museum. We put a single sandbag on each of the floor drains in the bathrooms in case the sewers backed up. At the same time, the city engineer was helping create a big sandbag wall behind the museum.”

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 11: “This is serious.”

“On Wednesday, June 11, flood forecasters were predicting 23 or 24 feet. Business owners and homeowners had worked hard for two days sandbagging and preparing their buildings. Everyone was prepared for that level. We didn’t have reason to doubt that 24 feet would be the crest — in the history of Cedar Rapids, flood forecasts had always been accurate.

“Little did we know what was to come. All the sandbagging turned out to be futile. If we’d known the river was going to crest at over 31 feet, nobody would have sandbagged. Our time would have been better spent clearing out the ground levels of buildings. There was so much that could have been saved; there was time to evacuate these items. Instead we were sandbagging to no avail.

[As detailed in “Flying Blind,” flood forecasters were working with the best information they had, but the flood had knocked out two critical flood gauges, depriving them of information needed to make an accurate crest prediction just as incredibly heavy rains hit the city.]

“When CRANDIC [the Cedar Rapids and Iowa City railroad] put cars filled with gravel on the Ninth Avenue railroad bridge to hold it down, I thought, ‘This is serious.’ I hadn’t seen that kind of preparation except in old photographs. I stood at the end of the bridge photographing the cars, and I asked a CRANDIC official there, ‘Do you think this is going to work?’

‘I sure hope so,’ he said.

“In fact, that bridge was the first landmark casualty of the flood. It collapsed before the crest.

“Throughout the day I heard reports that the water was getting seriously high and that downtown and adjacent neighborhoods might have to be evacuated. Then they announced that Veterans Memorial and City Hall [on May’s Island] were being evacuated. That’s when I suspected that Cedar Rapids would never again be the same.
“I grabbed my camera and headed to May’s Island. It was complete chaos. Local TV stations had anchor people on the island making last-minute, live reports showing how high the water was. People had crowded in to see the river level. At the same time, police were trying to herd everyone off, saying, ‘Everyone’s got to leave the island right now.’

[Stoffer Hunter pleaded with the Cedar Rapids police to be allowed to document the flood. Fortunately, he was well known as a historian, and they let him cross the Third Avenue bridge into downtown on foot after he promised to be careful.]

“By that time, it was late afternoon. I was amazed at what I saw. The water was marching up First Street rapidly: about a foot every five minutes. Everyone had left — I was pretty much the only person there — and it was eerily quiet. You could hear the water moving in, lapping at streets and sidewalks and buildings. It was as if it had a life of its own and was consuming the city. I realized everything was going to be enveloped. It already looked like the photos I’d seen of the 1929 flood. And we were still two days from the crest.

“I was almost shaking in panic: Cedar Rapids as I knew it was disappearing.”

THURSDAY, JUNE 12: Downtown in the Torrent — “Dumpsters ... cascading down Third Street.”

“It was pouring, torrential, horrible rain — five or six inches or more — all day long. The radio reported water rushing into downtown, flooding Czech Village, the Time Check neighborhood, the Oakhill Jackson neighborhood. I walked in the pouring rain toward Greene Square Park downtown in disbelief. The water had never been this high in the history of Cedar Rapids.

[Not only was the water high, it ran as fast as whitewater, carrying with it almost anything in its path.]

“Enormous objects — dumpsters and railroad ties and big trash cans and huge wooden spools of plastic tubing — were floating out of alleys and cascading down Third Street at breakneck speed. They were crashing into streetlights, shop windows, park benches. I heard crashing and glass breaking and water rushing. The railroad crossing lights and gates and warning bells were activated by the pressure of the rushing water, and every crossing was flashing and clanging away as though a half-dozen trains were heading toward me.

“It was surreal. It was overwhelming. It was like a dream. I couldn’t believe it. I saw it happening right in front of me — I was taking pictures and answering cell phone calls from radio stations wanting a historian’s perspective. I was reporting on what I saw. But I still couldn’t believe it.

[At about 6 p.m. the National Guard arrived and started encouraging the few people present to leave downtown. Stoffer Hunter took a few more pictures, then headed back home in a daze.]

“I felt like I was watching television of events happening somewhere else. The National Guard doesn’t come to our town. We don’t have national emergencies here.”

“The night of June 12 was one of the longest nights in Cedar Rapids. The water kept rising; we kept hearing about dangers to the water supply; more and more of the city was engulfed.”

FRIDAY, JUNE 13: “Catfish in Greene Square Park”

“June 13 was the day of the crest. It was strange because the weather was beautiful. The rain had stopped. The sun came out; there was a clear blue sky. About 1 p.m., shortly after the crest, the city called me asking if I would continue to take photos documenting the flood. That allowed me to get back into downtown. I was afraid of what I’d see: landmarks I’d known my whole life underwater.

“I arrived as the water was just starting to go down. The crest passed quickly: Downtown was only inundated for 24 to 36 hours. I watched the water recede, leaving debris and flotsam behind like an outgoing tide. There was no one there and nothing to do but watch the water go down, block by block. I took a couple hundred photographs that day.”
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[Stoffer Hunter got as close to the water as he could, roaming the streets, sometimes standing on benches for a better view. At one point he heard a flopping sound. It was a catfish, beached on Fourth Avenue. He picked it up and placed it back in the water; it went on its way, swimming down the street toward the river. He found several more large catfish beached in Greene Square Park.]

SATURDAY, JUNE 14: Czech Village — “The cats ... were happy to see us.”
[Stoffer Hunter wanted to get images of Czech Village, but that area was completely inundated. He encountered officials rescuing pets by boat and joined them.]

“The current got stronger the closer we got to Czech Village. The water had gone down by a couple feet by then, but it was still up to the second-story windows of some houses. It was spooky, surreal, unbelievable. We had to proceed very carefully down the center of streets so we didn’t hit submerged street signs. We did scrape one, but fortunately we were going slowly, so it didn’t punch a hole in the boat.

“It was a beautiful June day. Birds were chirping. But the stench was overpowering: It smelled like gasoline and other chemicals, and my eyes were tearing up the entire time. The water was dark brown with an oil slick on it. Debris floated past, including large bags marked Penford Products that had emptied themselves of chemicals in the flood. We were told not to touch the water to avoid something like acid burns, and it did burn when I got some on my skin. Whatever was in the water immediately killed some trees and shrubs.

“We pulled up to the bottom of the second-floor windows at 40 21st Avenue SW, where we’d gotten reports of cats trapped inside. We broke out the windows and heard cats meowing. The water was above the second-floor floorboards. The cats had jumped on the bed and were really happy to see us and to come with us.
“We were done rescuing animals and headed toward land. The water had just left the streets and grass there. We saw all kinds of critters — snakes, rodents, millions of worms — dead on the ground, poisoned by the polluted water, covered in a brown, silty sludge.”

SUNDAY, JUNE 15: Downtown — “Only shards of glass were left.”
Stoffer Hunter was one of very few people allowed back into downtown on June 15. He was determined to document the city “just as the flood left it” in the brief moment between the water’s recession and the arrival of cleanup crews. Again, he found downtown eerily quiet and paradoxically flood-ravaged, but sunny. On the streets at least, it was relatively dry.

Unlike the sludge he saw in Czech Village, Stoffer Hunter saw downtown streets scoured clean by the raging current. A strong, oily-chemical smell prevailed. In some places the force of the water peeled layers of pavement off streets and deposited them in large sheets downstream. It stripped bricks from swaths of sidewalk and ripped stone tiles off the base of the city’s iconic Five Seasons sculpture. Unlike the sidewalk bricks, most of which were never found, the stone tiles were deposited by the current in a pile on the downstream side of the sculpture.

Another downtown sculpture was knocked off its base. Heavy concrete planters installed years previously by crane and forklift had tipped over and rolled down the streets. Tree trunks were marooned on sidewalk railings. Toppled streetlights lay across the avenues. Abstract sculptures of recently floating debris rested where they touched down as the water receded — sometimes in the middle of intersections. A semi-trailer lifted by the floods was deposited diagonally across Sixth Avenue. Entire storefronts were blown in by the floodwaters.

The big, block-long display windows of Smulekoff’s Furniture store were smashed by debris and emptied of merchandise by the current. “Only shards of glass were left,” said Stoffer Hunter. New couches, refrigerators, and stoves — complete with price tags — were found miles downriver. The water also removed decades of backdrops from the display walls and uncovered earlier ones. “I saw images of 1940s radios and televisions,” he said. Grateful jewelry department sales staff later reported citizens walking into the store to return jewelry they had found in crevices in the street outside.

MONDAY, JUNE 16: New Bohemia — “Worse than downtown.”
“Four days after crest, the river level was probably 22 feet — just above the 1993 levels. People were able to get into a lot of areas such as New Bohemia, just south of downtown, for the first time.

“New Bohemia was even worse than downtown. There was lots of debris and pools of water in intersections. Entire sides of several houses had collapsed. Two or three houses had floated off their foundations onto streets or into back lots. Yet it was amazing how well the old commercial buildings survived. The 120-year-old plate-glass windows on Little Bo’s [a historic sandwich joint on what is now the corner of 16th Avenue and Third Street SE] were intact, even though they’d been exposed to 12 to 15 feet of water. I had thought that building would be collapsed in the street.”

TUESDAY AND WEDNESDAY, JUNE 17-18: Time Check — “The debris told the story.”
“On these two days I went to Time Check [a working-class class residential neighborhood along the river northwest of downtown]. It was one of the last areas anyone was allowed in — including me. So much more of the west side was affected than east side; much of it was residential. Time Check was also surreal. Things were not where they should be. A huge underground gas tank had floated up from beneath a gas station parking lot and through the neighborhood. Many houseboats [wrenched by the flood from their slips in the Ellis Boat Harbor just upstream] had drifted in and were washed up on porches, in streets, in yards.
“In many cases I knew the people whose homes and businesses I was photographing. Lots of times I was there before they were. I was overwhelmed with a great sadness of what was lost forever. On F Avenue I saw open boxes with small objects, thousands and thousands of them, littering the street. Coming closer I saw they were pens and pencils that had escaped from the Souvenir Pen and Pencil Company. On First Street West, there were dozens of sewing machines in the streets beside the West Side Sewing Company.

“The debris told the story.”

THE ONGOING RECOVERY — “Constant changes”
“I continued my documentation almost daily for years. The Cedar Rapids landscape has changed constantly since the flood at a pace that we haven’t seen since the 1960s. It is important to record the changes. I’m very encouraged by the historic preservation that’s been done, because the flood affected all the oldest sections of Cedar Rapids.”

[In 2017 Stoffer Hunter continued to give tours of historic districts in Cedar Rapids for The History Center, pointing out how the city has incorporated new construction into its historic fabric as it recovers from the greatest disaster in its — and Iowa’s — history.]
Throughout the night of June 12, 2008, hundreds of volunteers build a sandbag wall around Mercy Medical Center.

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MERCY

In an interview with The History Center, Tim Charles, CEO of Mercy Medical Center, talks about what it was like to evacuate a city landmark that no one — not even its insurance provider — thought would ever be touched by floodwaters.

“Fighting floods isn’t in any hospital administrator’s game plan. We actually perform disaster preparedness drills every year. We’re required to do it. But I never contemplated a disaster drill where I’d have to evacuate patients. Typically we’re preparing for a mass influx of patients.”

The power dropped out

“At 7:30 Thursday morning, June 12, the power dropped out. From that point forward we were on emergency power. But we didn’t anticipate the water would come anywhere close to Mercy. We were offering assistance to other hospitals here — St. Luke’s, which is located inside the 100-year floodplain — and to hospitals in rural communities and nursing homes in case they experienced flooding. But we weren’t anticipating any disruption in services here. We knew we could sustain water levels in the 25-foot range.

“But the water kept rising. As a precaution we decided to place a perimeter of sandbags. Meanwhile, staff were pulling manhole covers and watching the water level rise in the storm sewers. Ultimately there was a lake around the hospital.

“No staff left the hospital. Some were here all weekend. We had to take care of patients and protect our facilities. And hundreds of volunteers showed up to help sandbag.”

“A very emotional moment”

“A fire department captain said to get volunteers out of the water because there was an incoming electrical storm. So I stood on a bank of sandbags overlooking a long line of people stacking sandbags. I said, ‘Thank you, we appreciate everything you’ve done, but storms are coming and you need to come inside or go to safety.’

“Not until we’re done,’ they said. They stayed in the water and continued to work. It was a very emotional moment. We kept stacking them until water stopped rising. It was seeping in through entrances, so we had to pump everywhere we could. Some of the water that entered came through the sewer. It was horribly dirty — black water. We had toilets blow off the wall and shoot across the restroom and lodge in the opposite wall. We had two lower levels filled with water.”

“Water was pouring in”

“In the basement, our sump pumps were overwhelmed; water was pouring in through a vent 2 feet around. In the pitch black, working around wiring and switches that could have electrocuted them, a volunteer and a hospital staff member cut a circular plug out of plywood, pushed it up with their shoulders, and bolted it in place.

“About 8:30 Thursday night I decided to evacuate. We were on emergency power, and all of our electrical was routed through the basement, which was taking on water. If we lost power, 140 patients in the nine-story tower would be stuck up there and moving critically ill patients through stairwells was an impossibility.

“Area ambulance companies called for ambulances from as far away as Peoria, Illinois. At 11 p.m. we began moving patients to hospitals all over eastern Iowa.”
“We've got to get this done”
“There were teams working in every hospital room, working through every patient, bringing them down to the ambulances. At some point I got a report from the basement that they could only guarantee power for another hour. I told the teams, ‘You’ve just got an hour. We’ve got to get this done.’

“They immediately brought all of the patients out of the tower onto the first floor. What was so remarkable was the absolute calm and cooperation of these patients and their families. And patients and families commented on the calm of the staff. That’s why the evacuation worked so well. It is something we are very proud of. The last patient was discharged at about 7 a.m. Friday morning.”

“We spent $60 million”
“Once our patients were secured and relocated, I asked our CFO whether we had flood insurance. He crawled around in his office in the dark and found that we did. Apparently just a couple years prior to the flood a member of the finance department had raised the insurance payout limit. And because we were well outside anyone’s historical estimate of a flood, it was very inexpensive. For a few thousand dollars, we ended up with a policy that allowed us to fully reclaim the hospital and the business losses. The recovery of a hospital is tremendously expensive. We spent $60 million.

“I told the staff that we were going to reopen within two weeks. Work began Sunday afternoon installing driers and dehumidifiers and closing off damaged areas. That Monday afternoon we opened the radiation center, because we knew that our patients’ cancers would not wait, that Waterloo was to capacity, that the floods were heading downstream toward the University Hospitals in Iowa City. While we were closed, St. Luke’s was the only hospital in town. They’d taken 52 of our patients, and the pressure on their facility was intolerable. I needed to get ours back on line.

“A 100-person crew tore out damaged wallboard, floorboards, equipment, and furniture. We had to strip every wall, lift all the flooring. We couldn’t have any remaining mold or bacteria. You could stand at one end of the building and see to the other. We ended up with a brand-new lower part of the hospital.”

Bringing the patients back
“Sixteen days after evacuation we brought patients back.

“In September the archbishop came to reconsecrate the hospital. One of the iconic photos of the flood turned out to be an image of two of our Cardiac Catheter Lab employees sandbagging in their blue scrubs. Posters were made of that image, and those two young ladies were autographing them. That photograph is in the new Czech Museum. That’s one of the really wonderful photos that captured the mood of that day.

“We were and continue to be so grateful to our community for showing up in our time of greatest need. We couldn’t have done it without them.”

“The real success was there weren’t any lives lost.”
Initially, part of the local government workers’ battle with the flood included dealing with the disbelief of some of those they were trying to help. Mike Duffy was Linn County Operations Superintendent during the flood. In an interview by The History Center, he recalled the preparation and recovery.

“We couldn’t get the sandbags fast enough. We were originally incorporating structures along the river as a part of the wall. We weren’t getting a lot of cooperation from property owners who really didn’t want us in their backyards. We had furniture between the sandbag wall and the river that people weren’t collecting. People were saying they survived the ‘93 flood and thought it wouldn’t get worse than that.”
Reflecting on the whole experience, he said, “It was interesting to be a part of. You do what you need to do. A lot of things didn’t succeed: Walls failed, and the failures pile up on you. You keep digging, keep trying. Our first real success was saving the well. That was an amazing event. After the flood was all over, you start to think that the real success was there weren’t any lives lost.”

“The stars all lined up wrong.”

Steve Gannon was the Linn County Engineer in 2008. In the same interview as Duffy, Gannon recalled the May’s Island evacuation.

“We went to rescue the folks in the Cedar Rapids Administration building. We came in by boat. We were floating over the top of cars, and their headlights were on underwater. The boat we came in by end loader — three or four of us in an end loader bucket. You don’t want to find a hole [and tip over] when you’re driving an end loader through four feet of water.”

He said there was no single cause of the flood, no one event that elevated it from a serious disaster to an almost unimaginable catastrophe.

“It isn’t all about when the river gauge went out, the CRANDIC bridge going out,” he said. “It’s also about that Thursday night it was raining so hard you couldn’t see anything. It was like 40,000 cubic feet per second of water added onto the flood coming down the river. You could go from 28 to 31 feet just on that 40,000. The CRANDIC maybe added a foot.

“The stars all lined up wrong,” he continued. “In 1967 the Army Corps of Engineers did a study to define what they call a Standard Project Flood. A Standard Project Flood is a peak on a peak on a peak. You add water onto water. Every creek peak hits the major river at the time the river peak comes by. And no one ever thought that was a likely event. I remember having meetings with people, and we brought the Corps study out, and everyone thought that was not even a practical thing to think about. Not possible. And now it has happened.

“Government does step up in an emergency. People cooperate and help each other. That was true in this emergency more than any other. It was the most catastrophic, but some of the best cooperation. We put our own interest behind the interests of the public. Mike Duffy was extraordinary. All of our people came in when they didn’t have to. A winter storm you can run through on adrenalin, but this was nonstop for about a month. They have my gratitude.”

“It would just knock you down.”

Jim Berg was a State Emergency Liaison Officer for HSEMD who followed the flood down the Cedar River during the surge (see “Surfing the Crest.”). After the water started to recede, he worked in Cedar Rapids for two weeks helping manage debris disposal.

“We ended up with 66 DOT [Department of Transportation] dump trucks, 12 end loaders, 12 skid loaders, and 85 to 90 DOT employees hauling debris to landfills. We also had city dump trucks and garbage trucks. Linn County had just opened a new landfill on the northeast corner of Cedar Rapids” and had to move up the construction timeline for a new cell in the landfill to handle flood debris.

“It was hot as hell, and the flooded neighborhoods reeked of dead fish. It would just knock you down. I had to put Mentholatum up both my nostrils or I’d get sick.

“Debris had to be separated: Appliances, lawnmowers, snowblowers, and other household hazardous materials were taken to a big parking lot, where contractors removed the freon from refrigerators and air-conditioners, took the oil out of motors, and stripped all the hazardous materials so they could all be recycled under EPA regulations. Electronics were processed that way, too. Building materials, furniture, and clothing went to landfills. We weighed every truck and tracked how much debris of each kind there was for FEMA. They studied the data to help plan for other flood recovery efforts.”
FORESEEING THE UNFORESEEABLE
The flooding in Cedar Rapids was beyond the realm of possibility to many — especially to residents of 100+-year-old neighborhoods that had remained largely untouched by floodwaters throughout their history. The extent of flooding, which surpassed the 500-year flood level, astonished even veteran meteorologists and hydrologists.

Yet the possibility of just such an event had been foreseen — and its effects described — less than a year earlier. On July 5, 2007, 11 months before the flood, the Linn County Regional Planning Commission published a comprehensive Metro-Area Hazard Mitigation Plan.

The plan stated, “flooding is the most prevalent hazard in Cedar Rapids. ... the Cedar River in Cedar Rapids has risen above flood stage ... about once every four-five years. ... The most vulnerable flood areas are properties lying within 100-year or 500-year floodplains along the Cedar River. ... especially ... low-lying properties in the Rompot and Time Check neighborhoods.”

It continued, “Cedar Rapids has several large industries near the Cedar River that may be vulnerable to flooding. Floods affecting Quaker Oats, Penford, and Cargill could cause significant shutdowns and layoffs in addition to property damage. Efforts would need to be made to prevent floodwaters from coming into contact with hazardous materials.

“The Committee estimates that nearly 20 percent of the area within the current city limits may be threatened by a major riverine flood event. Several downtown bridges may be closed, causing major traffic disruptions during a 100-year flood event ... an evacuation plan would be needed in the event of a 500-year flood.”

The report went on to state that the city could expect sewer backups, manhole covers blowing off, and storm-sewer-conveyed water flooding streets and neighborhoods. It estimated that while the city might have 24 hours of warning for a riverine flood, it would likely have little or no warning of a flash flood. The flood of 2008 combined both types.

Flood Response Manual
The report noted that the annually updated Flood Response Manual details “activities including street closings, valve closing, pipe plugging, temporary levee construction, and other activities, to be undertaken at each stage of the Cedar River up to the 100-year flood level,” and states that “the City owns and maintains approximately 39 stormwater detention basins and has mandated the construction and maintenance of approximately 140 private stormwater detention basins.” These basins store rainwater runoff until lift pumps can pump it back into the river.
Finally, the plan recommended that the city undertake the following flood mitigation activities:

- Study the feasibility of acquisition/buyouts of properties that are continually vulnerable to flooding.
- Periodically review and update floodplain and drainage ordinances.
- Study the feasibility of constructing and maintaining floodwalls or levies.
- Study the feasibility of constructing flood-control reservoirs.
- Continually maintain streams and drainage channels.
- Continue to replace old sewer lines to prevent inflow and infiltration.
- Recommend that floodplain boundary maps be updated.
- Consider the installation of flood warning devices.
- Continually review and modify plans to reduce sewer backups.
- Study the feasibility of the purchase of land/easements in floodplains and along streams/drainage ways.
- Provide education and dissemination of information about past flood events and problem drainage areas.

Before 2008, Cedar Rapids had carefully considered the possibility of flooding, correctly predicted nearly all its effects, taken some steps via stormwater detention to mitigate flash flooding, developed a plan to deal with river flooding, and made a series of recommendations to follow to better mitigate the effects of flooding. However, the plan was only designed to deal with a 100-year flood and few if any of the recommendations had been acted upon.

The flood of 2008 made dramatically clear the need to plan for more extreme events. Since then, every one of the mitigation activities recommended has been acted upon to some degree — many using CDBG-Disaster Recovery funding allocated as the result of the 2008 flood. Some of these activities are detailed in “A Legacy of Resilience”.

RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

Seven days after the disaster struck, President George W. Bush toured Cedar Rapids and promised federal aid. But first responders and Cedar Rapids was already hard at work.

“In the first few days after the flood, the City, County, and Community agencies were almost entirely focused on emergency response efforts,” according to a report by RRCT. The team was a consortium of business, nonprofit, arts, housing, labor, and government representatives that met daily for the first two months after the disaster to cooperatively resolve flood-related issues.

“The City Police and Fire Departments, County Sheriff Department, and hundreds of community volunteers mobilized to evacuate residents from flood-affected neighborhoods, close roads, secure properties, protect wells, relocate critical city functions (City Hall, Fire, Police, Jail, Courthouse, School Administration, and County Administration). An emergency 2-1-1 response line was enhanced; a centralized website, corridorrecovery.org, was put into place [that website is no longer in service]; continuing media updates were provided; a daily flood-related newsletter was developed; and neighborhood meetings provided information and resources to flood-affected residents and businesses.”

Beginning the day after the crest passed, properties were assessed in the evacuated, cordoned-off, damaged areas of the city. Each building was assigned a colored placard indicating its structural stability.

As of July 10, 2008, the damage sorted out like this:

- Purple: 1 percent. Significant structural damage, must be demolished.
- Red: 7 percent. Structural damage, unsafe to enter.
- Yellow: 68 percent. Some damage, likely water inside.
- Green: 24 percent. No apparent structural hazards.
CEDAR RAPIDS

The city estimated a short-term rental housing at 2,195 units and long-term need for 420 new owner-occupied homes. In addition, they estimated 2,100 substantially damaged, owner-occupied homes would need rehabilitation or acquisition. As time went on, these initial estimates increased significantly. By the time Cedar Rapids published its River Corridor Redevelopment plan in December 2008, the number of homes confirmed damaged had reached more than 4,500. That’s considerably more homes than were contained in the 100-year and 500-year floodplain combined.

HOMELESS IN THE AFTERMATH
The staggering amount of damage to housing — almost $127 million more than in a 500-year flood, an amount neither predicted nor planned for — amounted to a full-blown humanitarian crisis. It made an estimated 10,000 Cedar Rapidians homeless refugees in their own city.

Not only had residents lost a place to live, they had often lost much, if not all, that was in those homes: clothing, furnishings, appliances, photographs and keepsakes, family heirlooms, financial and other records, vehicles, and tools that allowed them to earn their livelihoods.

To add to the trauma, flood survivors had to shovel the reeking, sewage-soaked remains of their material lives out of their houses. They then confronted the liability of paying taxes and often a mortgage on a stinking ruin while trying to figure out where and how to live in the future — and wondering how they would pay for a new home or repairs to their current home.

At first, some lived with relatives, friends, coworkers, or anyone who would take them in. Some moved into motels. Some literally camped out.

The widespread scale of the flood made matters worse. Power and utilities were out. Many roads were impassible. Vast tracts of the city were affected, meaning long trips into unfamiliar areas to obtain daily necessities. And the smell of the sewage-soaked debris was nauseating.

GLITCH AND RECOVERY

Contractor irregularities. An April 2010 HUD audit found that a contractor hired by the City of Cedar Rapids to administrate CDBG funds hadn’t been following HUD rules. Specifically, the contractor awarded $50,000 to one business without proper documentation, $103,075 to five businesses that were ineligible because they were not incorporated during the flood, $221,155 to eight businesses more than the 25 percent of business losses limit, and $261,175 to six churches that were ineligible because they weren’t businesses — a grand total of $635,405 in potentially ineligible awards.

HUD found that “the recipient of the funds, the City of Cedar Rapids, lacked adequate policies and procedures to ensure (1) each applicant met the necessary requirements and (2) grants complied with the 25 percent limitation.”

Because of its own investigation, IEDA discovered additional issues related to the contractor. It presented these findings at a Cedar Rapids recovery meeting on June 7, 2010:

- **Slow processing of loan applications.** IEDA found that between December of 2009 and March of 2010, the contractor had received 730 applications for the programs but had forwarded only 14 of them to IEDA.

- **Failing to follow up on potential deficiencies.** Identified in IEDA’s Monitoring Report to the city, which had warned that the city may be required to repay CDBG funds if they weren’t adequately documented and correctly awarded.

Ultimately, IEDA stepped in and hired an accounting firm to review all the awards and ensure that all CDBG money awarded in Cedar Rapids was properly spent.
CEDAR RAPIDS

Though concerned about the errors, Tim Waddell was pleased with the result. “In a disaster recovery as large as this one, there are bound to be issues,” he said. “That’s why all the procedures and policies are in place: so you can find and fix them before they become major problems. At IEDA, we worked with Cedar Rapids and HUD to make sure everything got back on track, that all the programs were working as they should, and that the money was going where it was supposed to.”

“It took everything.”
Cedar Rapids resident Marie Cada had not had an easy life prior to 2008.

She was forced by Nazis into a work camp in Prague. She and her late husband left the Czechoslovakia in 1948, fleeing Communist rule. They were shot at as they crossed the border into Germany, endured years in refugee camps there and in Switzerland, and eventually arrived penniless in the U.S.

They were glad to finally settle in a charming Victorian cottage in Czech Village. There Marie had lived happily for 40 years when the floodwaters filled her basement and rose to a depth of 17 inches on her first floor, forcing her to vacate the house and live with family members for five months. She was then 87 years old.

When asked by volunteers from the National Czech & Slovak Museum & Library in a videotaped interview in December of 2008 what the most stressful situation in her long and eventful life was, she replied without hesitation: “The flood.”

“Why?” her interviewers asked.

“Because it took everything,” she said — including the diary of her escape from Czechoslovakia and her long road to a home in Cedar Rapids.

Traumatic Experience
“I experienced the Second World War and experienced bombing,” said Jitka Schaffer in a March 2009 interview. “But it’s a dry destruction. You could get away from it.”

Not so with the reek and slime of the flood. With her son, Bob, she owned Czech Cottage, a gift store in Czech Village specializing in Czech porcelain, crystal, jewelry, Christmas ornaments, and fine glassware.

Nearly 7 feet of water destroyed half their inventory, swept away business records, and left the store and warehouse in shambles. “If I had been in business myself, without Bob, I would have packed up and gone back to the Czech Republic,” Schaffer said. That in spite of having spent “33 of the best years of my life” running her store in Cedar Rapids.

“It was a strange feeling knowing you had to evacuate,” Bob recalled. “I did debate to stay, but I knew I had to take my parents out. I had camping equipment and food. I could have lasted, but I don’t know how my parents could have.” The family evacuated but returned to rebuild their business and homes. “The store is now better than it was,” said Bob.

“Dirty, grimy water”
“There’s nothing cleansing about a flood,” said Mel Andringa in a December 2008 interview. An artist who taught at the University of Iowa, he founded the arts organization Legion Arts in the former Czech Slovak Protective Society meeting hall in New Bohemia just south of downtown in the 1990s.

“It’s all really, really dirty, grimy water that soaks into everything and gets into every page of a book,” he said. “I had drawings I’d made as a 10-year-old and drawings I’d made a few days ago, along with dishes and lamps and everything in a pile. The greatest loss in a flood is always objects and the information and memories that they contain. You don’t realize what things mean until they’re gone, and then you recognize the role they play in your life.”

His art studio was destroyed. His second-floor living space was untouched but unlivable. “We were without phone for a month, electricity for two months, gas for three and a half months. On October 1 we moved back to our apartment. We’d been three full months at a motel.”
“Tagged yellow”
“When we came back to the house it was horrifying, because with 17 inches of water on the first floor we lost a lot,” said Dick Nemec, another museum interviewee and Czech Village businessman. “Everything was soaked. Mud and muck everyplace, basement still half full of water. Grime and filth.

“Our home was tagged yellow, which meant that we could enter but not occupy it. We knew a lot of folks were getting tags that said they couldn’t go in the house at all.”

His attachment ran deep. “My grandfather designed and built this house,” he said. “That’s why I live here.”

His grandfather, Joe Nemec Sr., was a Czech immigrant cabinetmaker who worked with Grant Wood to design the staircase in the Robert Armstrong home, a Cedar Rapids landmark. He also helped build the grand staircase of Cedar Rapids’ Paramount Theatre.

It was not a home Nemec was about to abandon. But for a time, he had to.

“I stayed at my sister’s house for eight weeks,” he said. “I love my sister, but I think we’re both happy to each go our own way again. But it took that long to go through the basics before the city would allow us back.”

“Total disbelief”
“My house actually was 1 foot above the floodplain, according to flood insurance,” said Jerry McGrane, another Czech Museum interviewee. He’d lived in his vintage house in the Oakhill Jackson neighborhood for 17 years. He was also president of a neighborhood association and a member of the Cedar Rapids City Council.

“They knocked on my door at 5 o’clock in the morning and told us we’d have to get out right away,” he recalls. “So we took our camper and went to Squaw Creek campground” nearby.

“If I’d had some time I could have saved some things. We lost all our income tax records, phone numbers, family pictures — a lot of things that were not replaceable.

“My first reaction was total disbelief. We had beautiful woodwork, a great big wraparound front porch that I dearly loved. I had 74 inches of water in my first floor, and around the house it was 11 feet deep. A neighbor helped me break in past a refrigerator that was upside down blocking the front door. Everything was upside down. The muck and the stink were horrendous. The water had taken my wife’s baby grand piano and flipped (it) over like there was nothing to it. We had a lot of antique furniture, and some of the furniture didn’t look too bad. But I’d reach down to save it and it would just crumble.

“My wife made it pretty simple for us because she said, ‘I’m not living here.’ That took the load off us because we didn’t ponder on it like a lot of these poor people.

“When the people in Parkersburg lost their homes in the tornado, it’s a terrible thing. But here you haul your life out. [Chokes up.] I got to take a second here. I don’t know how anybody else handled it. I put my stuff out on the curb, and they put it in the truck and it’s gone. You can’t save it.

“We spent 30 days at the campground while we cleaned out our house. Eventually, we got a FEMA trailer.”

A home marked with a purple card and spray paint warning against entry.
WHERE THE MONEY WENT – Download
iowaeconomicdevelopment.com/userdocs/Module Resources/CedarRapidsMoney.pdf

About 32 percent of Cedar Rapids’ CDBG funding went to buying out 1,356 properties. Most were non-FEMA-matched funds for properties outside the 100-year floodplain, indicating the vast extent of the flooding. Another 32 percent was allocated to housing, roughly evenly divided between new single-family homes; new multifamily housing; and a suite of homebuyer assistance programs, including repair and rehabilitation of existing structures. Nearly 26 percent went to business assistance programs, including help for businesses to convert from the use of steam produced by a power plant knocked out by the flood to other energy sources. About 9 percent supported infrastructure — all to public, non-FEMA-matched drainage, levee, and utility projects. Less than 2 percent went to administering the grant funds.

BUYOUTS
Following the flood, the IEDA and Cedar Rapids officials started convening about recovery efforts. In a July 31, 2009, letter to then IEDA Director Mike Tramontina, Cedar Rapids mayor pro-tem Brian Fagan wrote: “Housing needs remain … top priority. The ability to fully fund non-FEMA housing buyouts is crucial.”

That’s because, according to the NFIP, less than 1 percent of Iowa residents had flood insurance in 2008, and the value of damaged properties plummeted after the flood. Many were worth less than the cost to demolish them.

FEMA offered buyouts based on pre-flood property valuations to those in the 100-year floodplain. But the flood damage to housing reached 1.5 times the 500-year flood level in Cedar Rapids. Even homeowners such as McGrane — who had more than 6 feet of water on his first floor — wouldn’t have qualified for a FEMA buyout since his house was located outside the 100-year floodplain - hence Mayor Fagan’s concern that IEDA find a way to use CDBG money to fund additional buyouts beyond those offered by FEMA.

The IEDA did find a way. Its non-FEMA buyout program funneled more than $117 million in CDBG money to completely fund the buyouts of 1,259 properties in Cedar Rapids that were ineligible for FEMA buyout. In addition, IEDA’s CDBG-funded FEMA-Buyout Match program kicked in $1.7 million to provide the FEMA-required 10 percent local match for FEMA buyouts. That reduced the financial burden on the severely flood-strained Cedar Rapids city budget and unlocked about $17 million in FEMA buyout funds.

Non-FEMA and FEMA buyout programs account for roughly 30 percent, or $122.4 million, of the total CDBG-Disaster Recovery Funds spent in Cedar Rapids after the 2008 floods.

Officials say the majority eligible for buyouts took them. Those who stayed often saw the assessed values of their homes decrease — sometimes dramatically. An April 2009 story on Cedar Rapids’ KGAN-TV reported that the value of homeowner George Schorg’s house decreased by about $30,000 even though he rebuilt it and his home is nicer than before.

“We are more or less just stuck here,” said Schorg, whose home was surrounded by houses abandoned during the flood.

“Assessors say that [being surrounded by abandoned homes and businesses] is what is bringing down the values of so many rebuilt homes,” he said.

Jan and Howard Holten lost their home to the flood. Jan expressed the feelings of many buyout program participants when she wrote city officials after getting her buyout check.

“Thank you for helping us receive the money. It has been a big relief to Howard and me. Since the flood of 2008, it has been a struggle. Every day seemed like a month and the time with no money became almost unbearable ... We still continue to drive by our tiny spot that used to be ours ... But once I crawled up out of that deep dark hole and the next day saw the workers filling it in ... it was over. The buyout money helped heal me and allowed me to look forward. With all the hard work you all did the darkness faded away.”
HOUSING
Another roughly 30 percent of the CDBG funds spent in Cedar Rapids, just under $122 million, went to housing programs designed to repair or replace housing lost during the flood.

New Housing Production
Major General Ron Dardis, former National Guard officer who was named executive director of RIO, said on April 9, 2009, “Even before the flood occurred, there was a need for additional housing. Last summer’s destructive flooding only widened the gap between the availability and the need.”

Dardis noted that it took “innovative thinking and partnerships involving the Iowa Department of Economic Development, the Iowa Finance Authority, the City of Cedar Rapids, builders and lenders” to build the housing that Cedar Rapids needed following the flood.

In Cedar Rapids, more than $42 million in CDBG-Disaster Recovery funding was spent to incent building new single-family homes to replace those lost in the flood. More than $49 million was spent building new multifamily housing.

In both cases, by federal law, at least 51 percent of the homes and apartments were priced at or below costs accessible to people or households whose incomes were at or below 80 percent of the county’s median income by household size.

Because housing stock in the whole region was depleted by the flood, owners and renters of housing subsidized with CDBG-Disaster Recovery funding weren’t required to have been personally displaced by floodwaters. Anyone meeting the income guidelines could apply.

Many irreplaceable historic buildings were lost in the flood. Nothing can replace a house that was home to a family for years — perhaps generations.

But in terms of safety from floods, new housing was a great improvement over the housing it replaced. It was located outside the floodplain or elevated above it. Many elevated apartment buildings incorporated garage space on the lowest level. Cars can be evacuated before a flood and the garage spaces cleaned and drained afterward with little resulting damage. The height garages add to the first-floor elevation greatly reduces the chance of floodwaters reaching apartment living spaces.

The new housing is also healthier to live in and more economical to heat and cool. All new housing was built with lead-free materials and energy-efficient insulation, heating and cooling systems, appliances, and lighting. Some include solar-electric panels that offset some of the buildings’ energy use.

The new housing was more environmentally friendly, as well. Many housing projects incorporated features designed to reduce runoff, such as rainwater catchment for irrigation and bioswales, permeable paving, and rain gardens to absorb and gradually infiltrate runoff. These techniques help even highly developed urban land absorb and filter water more like natural landscapes than traditional cityscapes, reducing storm sewer, stream, and river flows. Ultimately, these techniques help reduce the kind of flash flooding that turned the floods of 2008 in Cedar Rapids from a major riverine flood to an epic national disaster. These features will be discussed further in “A Legacy of Resilience.”

Housing built with the help of CDBG-Disaster Recovery funds feature a variety of building types, shapes, sizes, materials — even ages. Some housing units are brand new. Some are new additions to existing buildings. Some are extensive renovations of character-filled historic buildings.
Projects included large apartment complexes, small apartment buildings, buildings that combine first-floor retail locations with upper-story housing (in both old and new buildings), row houses, townhouses, condominiums, and single-family homes. Some new housing was slipped into infill lots, helping existing neighborhoods repopulate. Some was built in new developments.

The IEDA and other agencies worked with developers to come up with housing solutions that were sustainably built; attractive; served the needs of people of a variety of ages, incomes, family sizes, and housing type preferences; and fit into the style, scale, and character of the neighborhoods in which they were built.

**Owner-Occupied and Rental Property Repair and Rehabilitation**

CDBG-Disaster Recovery funded just over $14 million in repairs and renovations to Cedar Rapids homeowners. Nearly $10 million more went to landlords for repairing and rehabbing rental property.

Judy and Kenneth Miller owned a century-old home on the city’s hard-hit west side in 2008. For months after the flood, they had no electricity. They cooked their meals on a grill and in slow cookers in their garage and powered their recovery work with portable generators. They lost five cars and everything on the first floor.

But in an interview at the Iowa City Public Library on October 7, 2008, they said that the grueling recovery process had a silver lining.

“The good side of the flood is that even though there’s a lot of money and a lot of work that goes into fixing up our home, we’re going to have a better home than before,” said Judy. “We’re making it healthier. We’re making it more compatible for disability so that as we age we’ll still be able to stay in our home: grab bars in our shower, a ramp on our back porch. We’ll be able to live on the first floor if we have to.”

“And the windows are all modern-day technology,” added Kenneth. “The flood exposed some parts of the house that were rotten. If we hadn’t had a flood, we would never have known the rot was there. This way it’s like buying a new house and slipping it in our first floor.”

In many cases, CDBG-funded repair and rehabilitation resulted in homes that were better built, more energy-efficient, free of lead-based paint, and more able to withstand flooding than they were before. Some property owners in the floodplain elected to use part of the funding to elevate their homes above the floodplain.

Derek Taylor was a Cedar Rapids landlord in 2008. In a March 2017 video interview with rentprep.com, he recalls his experience with the CDBG-funded landlord assistance programs.

“I had no flood insurance. I think because of the big scope of the flood, the city knew that they had to do something for landlords in order to keep some kind of rental housing for low-income [people]. So what they did is they came out with a forgivable loan program ... you could get up to $25,000, so I applied for those loans and I got them. It was a forgivable loan. We didn’t have to pay money back or interest on the loan, but in return we had to provide the city with low-income housing. So we had to be registered with the city, and you had to meet certain guidelines on how much you could charge for rent and things of that nature. ... It was nice ... to have that backup there.”

**Homebuyer and Interim Mortgage Assistance**

Just over $3 million went to homebuyer assistance programs in Cedar Rapids; slightly more than $1 million went to interim mortgage assistance. According to a September 2014 story in *The Gazette*, homeowners Jon and Alice Galvin’s house on Fifth Street NW was destroyed by the flood and bought out by the city.
“The Galvins, as with other homeowners in the buyout program, received down payment assistance for a replacement house as they waited for the buyout program to get to them,” the article said. “In December 2010, they got their buyout check, which combined with down payment assistance and other funds allowed them to pay off the mortgage on their replacement home.”

BUSINESS
In an August 2008 State of Iowa report, the Cedar Rapids Downtown District’s Doug Neumann wrote: “It’s critical to re-create the services and amenities that made Downtown Cedar Rapids a viable business park, a vibrant arts & entertainment center, and an emerging residential neighborhood. We accept that some pre-flood businesses will not return; others will try to return but later fail. While we should do what we can to assist those businesses, it’s just as important that we focus on what is needed to be successful in the long-term recruitment and attraction of office tenants, entrepreneurs, specialty retail, and other downtown businesses.”

He prioritized restoring reliable electrical power; finding a fix for the city’s steam heating system; and improving parking ramps, sidewalks, skywalks, and other basic infrastructure.

Ultimately, just under $100 million in CDBG funding went to various business assistance programs in Cedar Rapids, sparking a commercial revival in the city.

The Spirit of the City
CDBG funding was instrumental in getting Iowa businesses back on their feet. But much of the credit goes to Cedar Rapids business owners and the uncomplaining, hard-working, forward-looking culture of the city itself.

Czech Village is a tight-knit neighborhood that in many ways came to symbolize the city’s history, damage, and rebirth during and after the flood. George Joens owned Joens Brothers Interiors — a carpet and floor covering store — and several other businesses in Czech Village in 2008. He spent his life savings starting nearly from scratch after the flood.

Joens — a soft-spoken, thoughtful, articulate man — was seen by many as the informal mayor of the Village and the embodiment of its heart and soul. A few days after the flood, he set up a card table in front of his ruined store with a sign reading “Open for Business” taped to it.

In December 2009, he sat down in his store with interviewers from the Czech Museum.

“We started right next door in a small store in 1959. It was an easy decision to start in Czech Village because my grandfather had a blacksmith shop down here on B Street. Czech Village was where we grew up and shopped. For our generation it is a privilege to be here.
CEDAR RAPIDS

“The European people built Cedar Rapids. Not just the Czechs — the Germans, the Poles, and everybody. Cedar Rapids had the packinghouse, Quaker Oats, and several other companies. They needed workers, and the immigrants were strong and good workers and invited friends here, and that’s how Cedar Rapids grew. Just like the Mexican people moving to Cedar Rapids today, they had to take the hard work. Grandpa was a blacksmith. Others went to work for the packinghouse skinning cows or for Quaker Oats doing hard manual work.

“After the flood, we were down here every day. Even though there was 50 years of stuff down the drain, you just thought you have a job to do and you got to get it done. I have six kids and 13 grandchildren, so whether they wanted to work or not, they went to work — this is how you do it when you have problems. We never hired anyone to clean it out.

“Each day it smells worse. That was the sewage. And we had food that was beginning to rot at Maria’s Tearoom. It had to be dealt with and dealt with quickly. We have a driveway that will hold 80 cars that we filled with our ruined belongings. The city, especially the guys who do the work, they worked like dogs, and I can’t say enough about what they did.

“We were going to get the damn thing cleaned out. And I think that attitude kept us from feeling bad. We just went wheelbarrow by wheelbarrow. Your body knows what to do.

“Czech people, they’re very stubborn. I was born and raised with that stubbornness, and I have some of it myself. We’ll go on, like everybody else. You’d like to think ‘poor me,’ but there were 10 square miles of people that lost everything, just like me. I don’t know how many times I can start over in my lifetime, but I know a lot of people older than me that are still clicking. But at age 73 I enjoy working. I enjoy selling carpet, working with people in their homes.

“Rebuilding — who else is going to do it? It’s got to be done. Somebody’s got to do it. You’ve got to do it yourself. I know everybody down here. We’ve all worked hard and spent a lot of money on recovery.

“I suppose I should feel like it’s stupid to rebuild, but I don’t. I have to think it’s just a one-in-a-million shot that it will happen again. That’s what I’m probably being stupid about.

“I think Czech Village should be saved. You bet. John in the Sykora Bakery sends his merchandise all over the world. People come here from Europe. John gets emails from some of those people saying, ‘What can we do to help?’ Sure, it should be saved. Forever.

“I can remember that first day we came down there was a reporter from The Des Moines Register. We were looking in Maria’s Tearoom [which Joens owns] and he was taking pictures through the broken window. He says, ‘What are you going to do?’ And I said [bursts into tears], ‘Maria would want us to replace it.’”

INFRASTRUCTURE

Once the rescue efforts were over and cleanup was underway, Cedar Rapids started assessing its infrastructure losses. According to a July 2009 State of Iowa report:

- Cedar Rapids’ Main Library, Central Fire Station, and City Hall were heavily damaged.
- Cedar Rapids Community School District suffered damage to schools and administrative buildings.
- Grant Wood Area Education Agency had a foot of floodwater in its building, threatening the agency’s ability to provide internet access and communications to many area schools. It got a bulletproof, fireproof, $400,000 “technology bunker” designed to withstand 150-mile-per-hour winds that sits on a foundation 3 feet higher than the 2008 floodwaters.
- The Paramount Theatre was substantially damaged and needed all new mechanical and electrical systems in addition to extensive historic restoration.
- Cedar Rapids Sewage Treatment Plant needed nearly $70 million in repairs to get it back on line.
CEDAR RAPIDS

- Cedar Rapids Recycling Building in the city’s public works complex needed nearly $2.8 million in repairs.
- The Jones Park Golf Course Clubhouse needed nearly $280,000 in repairs.

Several of these projects were rebuilt or repaired with a combination of FEMA and CDBG funding.

“Hard at work”
“Sanitary and storm sewer repair, replacement, and separation are important needs in many Iowa communities,” noted the report. “So far, more than 35 communities have already applied for CDBG infrastructure funding for projects in this category. Flooding caused major damage to already deteriorating systems in many cases, and others are in need of sewer separation measures. These measures assist communities in managing stormwater, preventing flooding and overflow, improving water quality, and reducing sewer backup problems.”

A September 2008 State of Iowa press release said that the state had “been hard at work on behalf of the cities and towns of Iowa to ensure they have access to the resources they need to rebuild their communities after this year’s flooding and severe weather.” It added that the state looked forward to continuing to work with its partners in the federal government to help affected Iowans to recover and rebuild “stronger and better than ever before.”

“The city of Cedar Rapids was hard-hit by the floods in June, and since that time the community has rallied together to begin the recovery process,” said U.S. Representative Dave Loebsack. “This funding is critical for ongoing relief effort because not only will it allow for repairs to the water treatment plant, but it will also provide residents and business owners the assurances they need to return and rebuild and encourage greater investment in the local economy.”

A new Cedar Rapids Federal Courthouse was completed in 2012 to replace one damaged in the flood. The new building was raised one foot above the 2008 flood level and is located just south of downtown. The choice of site was deliberate. According to a KCRG news report at the April 26, 2009, groundbreaking for the facility, Senator Tom Harkin said, “I mean we’re building this magnificent courthouse here, not outside the city. Right here in downtown, and what we’re saying is you can invest here, you can come back to downtown Cedar Rapids.”

What CDBG infrastructure programs funded
A total of just over $37 million in CDBG-Disaster Recovery money paid for dozens of infrastructure repair projects in Cedar Rapids, including:
- Replacing storm sewers and culverts
- Repairing drainage ditches
- Stabilizing stream banks to help prevent erosion
- Improving neighborhood rainwater retention basins
- Reconstructing sanitary sewer siphon pipes under the Cedar River
- Rehabilitating the Morgan Creek Lift Station
- Constructing the Sinclair Levee and Pump Station

The Master Plan
On June 23, 2018, the Cedar Rapids City Council adopted the Cedar River Flood Control System Master Plan. The Plan will cost approximately $700 million over 20 years and is partially funded by a $11.5 million CDBG-Disaster Recovery Grant.

According to the city, “The master plan is a long-term plan that will provide direction for the implementation and construction of the flood control system and has been developed to protect as many flood-vulnerable properties as possible.”

The city states that “the flood control system will be designed to convey the same water volume as the flood of 2008, reducing flood risk through the heart of Cedar Rapids on both the west and east sides of the river. The system will include a combination of floodwalls, levees, and gates and incorporate aesthetic elements that reflect our community’s culture, history, and vision.”
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The city says aspects of the plan that had been built or were underway as of 2017 include:

- **Czech Village**: Utilities were relocated in 2017. Construction of a levee that will form the first permanent flood control on the west side of the river. The half-mile-long project will protect the neighborhood from a river surge of up to 19.5 feet. When the entire flood control system is completed, the levee will protect up to the level of the 2008 flood.
- **Downtown**: The CRST Riverwalk created a colored-concrete pedestrian walkway along the Cedar River between Second and Third Avenues.
- **NewBo District**: The Lot 44 Pump Station located along the river between 8th and 12th Avenues NE can pump 12,000 gallons of runoff per minute from the city’s storm sewer system into the river. Housed in a building that complements the neighboring architecture, it was completed in spring 2018.
- **Sinclair Levee**: It stretches just under a half mile from the African American Museum to the Alliant Substation. It averages 13 feet tall and was completed in late 2017. The levee provides immediate protection from a river crest of approximately 20 feet and will protect the area from a 2008-level flood upon completion of the entire flood control system. It incorporates a 12-foot-wide, concrete-paved bike/pedestrian trail on the top. It includes walls next to 16th Avenue that will accommodate a floodgate, scheduled to be installed later.
- **Sinclair Detention Basin**: Constructed in 2016 and 2017, the basin can store rainwater until it can be pumped back into the river.
- **Sinclair Pump Station**: It was built at the same time as the detention basin and pumps stored rainwater out of the basin and into the river at a rate of up to 2,500 gallons per minute.

CEDAR RAPIDS RECOVERY NEWS

Four media reports spanning nearly 10 years highlight the progress of the city’s recovery.

**One Year Later: An Indelible Mark**

Nearly 12 months after the flood, Stephen J. Lyons took stock of where the city stood in a feature story in *American Way*, the American Airlines in-flight magazine. It was reprinted by *The Gazette* on May 28, 2009. He wrote: “The flood has left an indelible mark. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) trailers are scattered throughout the city. Block after block of abandoned homes remain in working-class neighborhoods like Time Check, Little Bohemia, and ... Czech Village. But with the kind of can-do mentality Iowa is famous for, Cedar Rapids is slowly coming back. A billboard on Interstate 380 serves as a rallying cry, stating, ‘Below this sign a great city is rebuilding.’”

The article goes on to quote Cedar Rapids mayor Kay Halloran: “Downtown is coming back slowly. We cheer every time a business reopens that has been closed. Most of our major employers who were impacted have reopened, but they’ve reopened on a limited, temporary basis. In the meantime, our commercial recovery is moving ahead. Cedar Rapids is a large center for agri-industries like Quaker Oats and Cargill, so we don’t want the customers of agri-industries to think we’re out of commission — because we aren’t.”

Shannon Meyer, president of the Cedar Rapids Chamber of Commerce, weighed in as well, saying she saw “positive signs of recovery every day.” Meyer’s office is the administrator of Jump Start, a state program that helps businesses get back on their feet with cash grants. As of March 1, 2018, Jumpstart had awarded more than $12 million to 502 businesses. Meyer said that when the owners come in for their checks, ‘they often have tears in their eyes.’
“There are small businesses coming back every day. That’s the Iowa mentality. People here are absolutely resilient. They will not fail. They know that they want their businesses to come back and to come back better than ever. We’ve got commitments from our large industries here. They are not going anywhere. They don’t want to leave. They love the Cedar Rapids area.

“And we’ve got large [local] corporations such as Rockwell Collins and Aegon that weren’t physically flooded but that have really stepped up and contributed significant amounts of dollars and professional experience.”

Five Years Later: “Rising Above the Waters”
In 2013, KGAN Channel 2, Cedar Rapids’ CBS-affiliate TV station, produced Rising Above the Waters, a special news program that focused on the progress made in the five years since the flood.

Hosts Tiffany O’Donnell and Scott Sanborn ticked off the city’s accomplishments:

- The grand reopening of the US Cellular Center, the convention center, and the remodeled Doubletree by Hilton.
- City Hall moving into a permanent location in a renovated former federal courthouse after moving off May’s Island and interim offices.
- A new glass high-rise at the southern edge of downtown houses the Federal Courthouse.
- New shops and businesses reoccupying formerly ruined storefronts.
- A return of restaurants, pubs, and nightlife.
- The restoration and remodeling of Theatre Cedar Rapids and the total renovation of the Paramount Theatre.
- The opening of the new City Market in New Bohemia.
- The National Czech & Slovak Museum & Library leading renovation of Czech Village. “The mostly refurbished museum was jacked up, pivoted, and relocated on ground 11 feet higher than the original site,” noted the documentary. When it reopened, “so did many businesses that surround it: antiques shops, bakeries, pubs, delis, and restaurants.”

Congressman Braley summed up: “When you see how downtown Cedar Rapids has been reborn in some ways, and you see new businesses moving in, new investments taking place, it kind of gives credibility to some of those statements made early on after floods hit when officials were saying, ‘We will rebuild, we will be better, we will be stronger.’”

Eight Years Later: “Great Strides”
In September of 2016, Cedar Rapids was tested by the Cedar again. The river rose to about 22 feet above flood stage. That’s nine feet short of the 2008 level of 31+ feet. The 2016 crest passed with little if any damage, highlighting how much better prepared the city was because of the mitigation efforts that followed the flood of 2008.

In two days, the city built almost 10 miles of temporary flood protection — sand-filled, stackable HESCO barriers and earthen levees — designed to protect the city against a 26-foot crest. They can be deployed much faster than sandbags because they can be filled and moved with heavy equipment rather than by hand, and they often work better than sandbags do.

According to a September 30, 2016, article by Rick Smith in The Gazette, the city had made “great strides” since 2008 in making permanent changes to help mitigate another catastrophic flood:

“City Manager Jeff Pomeranz acknowledged the many improvements the city had been able to make since 2008 with the help of federal disaster dollars, state and city dollars, private donations, and private investment.

“The vast majority of the most at-risk homes and businesses, for instance, had been bought out and most have been demolished ...”

“In addition, the city was able to replace its flood-damaged library, central fire station, public works building, and animal shelter on higher ground and to renovate and better protect City Hall, the Veterans Memorial Building, and Paramount Theatre.
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“The city also was able to raise all of its drinking-water wells and to install a flood protection system around its wastewater treatment facility.”

Still on the city’s to-do list in 2016, according to the article: “better runoff control in the watershed north of Cedar Rapids and ... federal funding help for a permanent flood protection system.”

Nearly 10 Years Later: “Bounced Back”

In the fall of 2017, Hurricane Harvey’s devastation of Houston was in the news — and Cedar Rapids became an example of a successful recovery.

“How a Midwestern City Bounced Back from Its Own Harvey,” a September 2017 story in The Wall Street Journal, credited Cedar Rapids with making the most of its recovery funding: “In the years since [2008], the city has worked with businesses, charitable foundations, and nearly $1 billion in federal, state, and local funds to transform itself, trading in dilapidated buildings and meatpacking plants for new office towers, loft-style condos, trendy coffee shops, and bike lanes,” the article said.

It continued: “Many, many people in our community will say they would not wish a flood like that on anyone, but it’s the best thing that happened to us,” said Chuck Peters, chairman of Folience, an employee-owned holding company that owns the local newspaper, The Gazette.

“New Orleans struggled for years after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 to fully recover,” said the article. “Cedar Rapids was able to use its disaster as a springboard into its future as a modern, more vibrant metropolis.”

The story went on to detail how Investments from the private sector, coupled with disaster recovery funds, have paid off.

“Gross domestic product for Cedar Rapids, Iowa’s second-largest city with a population of some 131,000, has grown by nearly 40 percent to $18 billion in 2015, the most recent year available, from $13 billion in 2007, the year before the flood, according to Bureau of Economic Analysis data.

“The number of area businesses has grown 25 percent since 2007, and downtown now has 674 residential units, a 62 percent jump, according to the Cedar Rapids Metro Economic Alliance. Total property values have risen 18 percent, the city says.

“We had an opportunity with a lot of federal and state money to really transform the place,” said Doug Neumann, executive director of the economic alliance. ‘We did 25 years of development in five years.’

The article concluded: “Some in Cedar Rapids think their story could provide hope for others. ‘There definitely is that sense in town that Cedar Rapids is a better place now than it was after the flood,’ said Clint Twedt-Ball, executive director of Matthew 25, a community-development corporation that rebuilt homes. ‘I think that will be true in Houston.’”