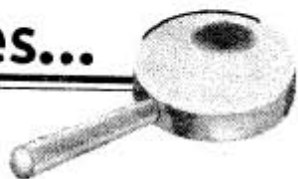


Behind the Headlines...

By Eva Ruth Moravec



Now that FEMA's new maps have been officially adopted and put in place, more than 7,000 Houstonians have realized they are now located within a flood way, the path water takes during a flood.

"This is the best information available," said Mike Talbott, director of the Harris County Flood Control District, about the new maps that HCFCD co-produced with FEMA. "It was a \$30 million effort to create a totally new study."

The maps are based on data from 2001 and were released for public review beginning in 2003. However, last October, Houston City Council amended Chapter 19 of the Code of Ordinances, which restricts building in the City's flood ways.

Prior to last October, structures could be built in the flood ways if it was determined that their location would not cause any rise in the water traveling down the flood-

way, or was documented as "no-rise". Now, no structures are allowed to be built in the flood ways, with one exception-- "hardship"-- which is not explained.

Structures in the flood way may cause harm to other Houstonians, so the ordinance was written to discourage building in them. In addition to no "no-rise" exceptions, the revised ordinance stipulates that if a home in the flood way is destroyed because of a flood, the owners may rebuild over a 10-year period, and the amount of repairs is not to exceed 50 percent of the original structure's value.

"We did not change many aspects," said District C Councilwoman Anne Clutterbuck, who helped to rewrite Chapter 19, "and it reflects a general city policy that we all benefit from the conveyance of water."

However, Clutterbuck has

New FEMA Maps Place 7,000 Houstonians in Flood Ways

pressed fellow Council members and the Mayor to examine Chapter 19 further, and "to inject some common sense interpretation of the ordinance."

Attorney David Juist has lived in District C for the past 30 years and has been eyeing property on Glen Arbor, off of North Braeswood, for some time. He found his dream lot about five years ago and soon after retained an architect and drafted plans.

"In connections with discussions with the City Engineer," Juist said, "we learned that the flood way extends to the middle of the footprint of our planned home, and we would not be able to build the house."

He may not build in the front 66 feet of his lot, which is in the flood way, and considering setback lines, the remaining lot is too small to build on in a reasonable manner. However, if Clutterbuck has her way, some alterations to Chapter 19's implementation may save residents like Juist from paying pricey taxes on a lot that cannot be developed.

"Flood maps are only reviewed once in 10 years," Clutterbuck said, "but maybe the City could map more frequently to give the benefit of our improvements to the residents."

Talbott said that HCFCD has spent \$1 billion on reducing flood damage in the past decade, and a \$372 million Capital Improvement Plan is being considered for ap-

proval this week. Juist said he believes Project Brays, an HCFCD/ Army Corps of Engineers project to expand Brays Bayou, will improve drainage in the Glen Arbor area and may cause flood ways and flood plains to shift.

"The maps, based on 2001 data, are no longer accurately describing what's happening with Brays Bayou," said Juist. "There has to be some reason in this. I want to be part of the solution, but there has to be a reasonable approach."

Project Brays, according to HCFCD Program Manager Raouf Farid, is under construction and already protecting against flooding along the bayou.

"We're five to seven years away from Buffalo Speedway," Farid said, "but they are already seeing benefits from widening at the mouth."

Clutterbuck also wants to investigate "no-rise" options for building within the flood ways, for example, homes built above the flood way that allow water to traverse underneath.

"We were already going to build on a pier-and-beam type of design," Juist said, "but we weren't going to build a beach house." He said he has no problems with building to allow for water to traverse down the flood way, but feels trapped.

Under the current ordinance, the footprint of a home in the flood way may not increase; but the former owner's home, demolished

before he bought the lot, had a larger footprint than the one he has planned.

"I'm hoping that the City will in some way relent on this ordinance," Juist said. Clutterbuck said she is skeptical that Chapter 19's language will change, but that she's pushing for cooperation that will "still honor the private rights of property owners," she said.

Volunteers Needed for Disaster Shelter

Christ the King Lutheran Church is a participant in the American Red Cross Shelter Program, and you can be a part of this neighborhood project. A core of 30-40 individuals is needed who will work as a team to staff the shelter around the clock when the shelter is activated.

The average length of time a shelter is open is three days. Duties include registering clients, setting up sleeping areas and providing meals.

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