

How to Conduct a Community Assessment

Before developing a Substantial Damage Response Plan (SDRP), communities need to understand their capabilities. By completing a thorough community assessment, the SDRP can be drafted to complement local plans and regulations and make the best use of the strengths of the floodplain management team. Past gaps in floodplain management that increase substantial damage potential can also be better understood to prepare for future events.

After completing the community assessment, a community may choose to increase community capabilities through revision of ordinances to establish higher standards, revise the emergency operations plan to tie into the SDRP, boost outreach, and hire or train additional staff to assist in floodplain management and substantial damage response. Once capabilities have been established/improved through a thorough Community Assessment, the community can confidently draft a SDRP that is community specific and leverages collective capabilities.

Who Should Take Part in the Community Assessment

All staff who have a role to play in substantial damage response in the community should be involved in the community assessment. In addition to the floodplain manager, this could include the following:

- Building code official
- Engineer
- Emergency manager
- Planning/zoning official
- Public information official
- GIS staff

What to Include in the Assessment

A community assessment should include review of the following.



FEMA

Outreach Capabilities

Current flood related outreach efforts should be evaluated to determine how the public is educated about flooding. If possible, the knowledge level of the public regarding flooding and disaster events should be determined.

Communication channels that would be used for emergency notification and important post-disaster messages should be identified.

Code, Ordinance, and Plan Review

A community's flood damage prevention ordinance usually outlines requirements related to substantial damage. This ordinance may be supplemented with additional floodplain-related requirements in building codes, zoning ordinances, etc. The community assessment should review any codes and ordinances that establish regulatory requirements for substantial damage in the community. This includes state and federal requirements. Any higher regulatory standards should be noted to determine how they impact substantial damage response. The written language of codes and ordinances should be evaluated, and, more important, the assessment should determine how their requirements are carried out in practice.

Existing plans or procedures that are in place to guide emergency response for events that could result in substantial damage should also be evaluated, as the SDRP will be developed to complement emergency procedures.

Permitting Process

In addition to standard building permits, construction in the floodplain usually requires specific floodplain development permits. The community assessment should include a review of all permitting requirements that apply to new development and potential repairs to disaster-damaged structures. Mechanisms for enforcement of permitting requirements, including inspections, should be evaluated in order to identify potential gaps in enforcement that may have resulted in riskier development practices and higher rates of substantial damage.

Personnel Capabilities

It is critical that communities identify the staff and skill sets available for substantial damage response. Staff with training or certifications (such as Certified Floodplain Managers) should be described, and floodplain management responsibilities of each staff member should be outlined. Staff available to provide support in substantial damage response, such as emergency or public works staff, should be included as well.

Major events may overwhelm in-house staff and require external assistance. The assessment should include a review of resources that could be available to support substantial damage response, including non-profit groups, neighboring municipalities, or state or federal agencies. The mechanisms required to request assistance should be described within the assessment.



Figure 1. A community assessment identifies staff available to support a substantial damage response

Substantial Damage Capabilities

Before the SDRP can be drafted, past substantial damage response efforts and the current substantial damage process should be understood. If a recent event resulted in substantial damage determinations, the process that was completed should be the focus of this portion of the assessment. If no recent event has occurred, the assessment should determine who is currently responsible for which steps in the substantial damage process, including the following:

- What are the triggers for substantial damage inspections?
- How are properties needing inspection identified?
- How is the value of a property determined?
- How is substantial damage determined?
- How are property owners notified of the determination?
- What is the appeals process?
- How are records kept?