

EPISODE 1: Flood & Recover

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PRIYA: From The Economist Intelligence Unit, welcome to Flood Flash: a podcast on investment in flood mitigation and what it means for communities across America.

You just heard Mayor Tom Stiehm of Austin, Minnesota talking about the kinds of concerns his community, and most communities, face when flooding occurs.

My name is Priya Bapat and I'll be your host.

In our first episode, we'll hear from Mayor Stiehm, who has years of first-hand experience with floods and the aftermath in his community.

Mayor Stiehm: Austin, Minnesota is about 25, 24, 25,000 people. We're located kinda Southeast, South Central Minnesota. We're 10 miles north of Iowa. Our biggest employer is Hormel Foods.

Mayor Stiehm: Their flagship factory and their corporate offices are here

Mayor Stiehm: This is – we're kinda not quite, we're just south of the headwaters of The Cedar and of course this is the same Cedar River that goes through Cedar Rapids and Cedar Falls, Iowa, so it's a major river.

PRIYA: Rivers can lead to flooding. And one of the floods that had the most impact on Austin happened in 2004... Here's Mayor Stiehm...

Mayor Stiehm: Well, what's happened over the years is we've really become used to the flooding so even though 2004 was the second-highest water level we've had it didn't have the effect on town that let's say a much lower level would've had, say, 15, 20 years before that just because people were used to it, we knew what was coming, when it's coming, where it's going, things like that. I mean there were times back in the early years where we used to – the police used to – go around with their loudspeakers on telling people to leave their houses because you didn't know what was gonna happen.

Now with checking the gages north of town and stuff, we pretty much know what we're gonna get, when we're gonna get it and so it didn't have the effect that it used to have, a lotta the homes had been relocated or we just buy 'em out and take 'em down, a lotta business have been relocated. I mean, there's areas of town now that used to be pretty – have a lot of businesses that are just basically parks now.

We've also put up a lotta berms to protect some of our major industry and housing areas. So I think the flood of 2004 was our second-highest flood on record but it was the second-lowest amount of damage we'd had and, of course, we've done a lot of work even since 2004. If you drive around town we have signs that will show the highest level the water has gotten in a flooding event.

PRIYA: Even for a community where flooding was a common event, not all its citizens were prepared when it did happen. So... we asked the mayor about what concerns weighed most heavily on community members after the flood.

Mayor Stiehm: Well, I think obviously you know whether they're gonna be covered for insurance is their main concern but most of them, most of the people in those areas have insurance. They're also worried about the price of insurance.

I don't think there's anything that's more you know I guess disgusting is the word than a basement that's had six feet of water in it.

And then finally you get rid of the water, everything in there is ruined and I don't know that you ever get rid of the smell so you know I think the concerns with people are a lot of 'em is are they gonna be able to stay in their house, are they gonna have to move, are they gonna be able to get to work today, is work gonna be open, and things like that, plus are we gonna get state aid, will it be federal, you know? Are we gonna be declared a Federal Emergency Area so we can tap into the federal aid? Those are our concerns.

PRIYA: Flooding is costly for communities. Is there anything they can do to avoid those bills in the first place? We'll unpack all this and more in our next episode of Flood Flash.

Thanks to Mayor Tom Stiehm of Austin, Minnesota for joining us. And we'd also like thank our sponsors Resilience Action Partners and FEMA.

For more information on other communities across the US and how you can help your own community, visit floodeconomics.com.