

EPISODE 3: Making Mitigation Happen

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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 what his community has learned about taking proactive mitigation measures against flooding.

I'm Priya Bapat. And on our last episode, we looked at the costs associated with floods, including the price of flood insurance. Senator John Kennedy of Louisiana talked to us about just that...

Senator Kennedy: Well you'll have homeowners turn in their keys. We have about 450,000 policies in Louisiana. Only 20 percent of our homes actually have flood insurance. More should carry it.

PRIYA: Today, we'll find out how mitigation projects – preventative measures that can decrease flood damage – can not only reduce a community's recovery costs... but can also bring down the cost of flood insurance altogether.

We'll talk again to Mayor Tom Stiehm of Austin, Minnesota – whose community has taken some major steps to address the continual flooding his community faces. Here's Mayor Stiehm...

Mayor Stiehm: It doesn't necessarily have the date of that event but there'll be a blue sign with, like, waves on it and it'll say, "You know this the high watermark during our floods" and a lotta people are amazed when you drive around town on a day, a regular day, you know, a dry day. We haven't had any major rain or water events and you look at those signs and then you'd think, "How in the world could water have ever gotten up that high?" But they do, you know? It has.

PRIYA: We know from experience that investing in flood mitigation actions now, can prevent future flood damage. And we also know that there are many different funding options for communities as well as homeowners.

We asked Mayor Stiehm what the Austin, MN community is doing to ensure future protection from floods and any advice he would offer other community leaders who are similarly thinking about the best options to protect their communities over the long-term.

- Mayor Stiehm: Yeah we did have some high water here I think last year but it wasn't enough to cause damage. Now 15, 20 years ago it may have caused significant damage but just because of the way everything is you know things we've done that we're pretty used to the flooding and a lot of it. Now when we get some of these high-water events, life just seems to go on. We'll close a few roads and everybody goes to work and it's not a big event.
- Mayor Stiehm: We've done an awful lot, we just finished a \$9 million project on North Main where we've berm'd up some of the Hormel offices, Bellisio Foods, some housing areas and some industry down there so now we're kind of basically through the major parts of our flood-control program I think the sales tax lasts for 20 years, which would be approximately 2026 and, hopefully, we'll be done before then.
- PRIYA: So, from one community to another, what kind of advice would Mayor Stiehm give other communities that are considering mitigation projects?
- Mayor Stiehm: We see a lot of different towns of course in our area and other areas that get flooded or will go through these flooding events and at the end of the event they just wanna fix the stuff that was broken and submerged but they don't wanna fix the problem. I guess my advice would be go to the source of it and fix the problem, don't just clean up after each flood.
- Mayor Stiehm: ...and work with your legislators to do it. You don't have to do it by yourself. That's what government's for is to help you on projects like that.
- Mayor Stiehm: ...we haven't cured the problem, we're always gonna have high water events, they're always gonna cause damage, you know, and hopefully no more deaths but we really have moved it, you know? It's not the issue it used to be years and years ago.
- Mayor Stiehm: It's not something you have to do on your own and fix the problem don't just fix you know the mess that came afterwards.
- Mayor Stiehm: And I think that's the approach we took in basically 2006. Now that was the year I was elected but this sales tax was passed and they came up with that flood program before I was elected but I think that's the big change now is we just sat back and watched 'em for 20, 25, 30 years and then, in 2006, we started taking corrective actions and it's been a boon to the community. I mean, it's really been huge and I think what we're looking at with the weather cycles and the global warming and stuff, it's not gonna get better, you know?
- Mayor Stiehm: We know, long-term, you know, it's not gonna get better, it's only gonna get worse so you can't just sit back and let it happen to you, you need to do something to fix the problem.
- PRIYA: Studies have shown that for every dollar spent on mitigation, communities can save up to six dollars in benefits, such as post-storm cleanup and rebuilding.

Aside from the financial benefits, this means less of an interruption to everyday life.

Thanks to Mayor Tom Stiehm of Austin, Minnesota for sharing his experiences with us. And a big thank you to 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.