

Lesson #6 Consider whether you really need to rebuild everything

In the rush to rebuild after a flood we can miss opportunities to increase community resilience by moving roads, buildings and structures out of floodplains. In some places, alternate roads outside the floodplain can get vehicles and people to the same location with only a marginal increase in travel time. Some examples follow.

West River Road parallels the New Haven River and connects Lincoln and Bristol. It is the main route out of Lincoln. Flooding in 1998 washed out portions of the road and isolated Lincoln, and flood damage along the road still occurs on a regular basis. Lincoln has adopted a River Overlay Area in its zoning regulations to prevent floodplain development, but the overlay

specifically avoids public roads under an assumption that they would always be protected. Yet alternate travel corridors exist – at least three other routes travel uphill from West River Road and avoid the floodplain. Increasing the capacity of these roads rather than continually rebuilding West River Road could save the town money in the long run.

Upper Cold River Road in Shrewsbury is a dirt track that angles off of Cold River Road four miles east of its intersection with Route 7. The road hugs a steep hill before crossing the Cold River at a picturesque covered bridge. Brown's Bridge has spanned the Cold River since 1880 and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Irene spared it, barely. The bridge was knocked off its foundations and required substantial repair. With assistance from FEMA the bridge was rebuilt. Landslides along the road between Brown's Bridge and Cold River Road had made the route impassible. A few years after Irene, the town of Shrewsbury submitted a Pre-Disaster Mitigation (PDM) grant application which was selected by FEMA for federal funding to relocate a portion of the road onto more stable slopes. The project is underway.

Deciding not to rebuild has become a more accepted means of increasing resilience to future floods. A host of communities, with FEMA assistance, have bought and removed homes destroyed by flooding. As of July 2019 Vermont communities have purchased and removed more than 120 flood-vulnerable homes, using a combination of hazard mitigation grant funding and community development block grant funds associated with Tropical Storm Irene. Under this program, the properties purchased must be maintained as open land.

People – and communities – understandably develop emotional attachment to what they have built, nurtured and maintained over the years. Homes, buildings and infrastructure represent significant, hard to replace, financial investments. Yet, it's important to look ahead and take advantage of available opportunities to reduce flood vulnerability. In doing so, we minimize risks to life, property and community facilities. We need to change and evolve as a society and adapt to new circumstances.



Upper Cold River Road in Shrewsbury washed away during Irene. Continued water seepage from the nearby hillside poses a significant construction challenge for this dirt road. Photo by Lori Fisher.