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The Edge of Disaster

By Jim Jones

Between August 4th and September 13th the town I live in was struck by an F2 tornado and then a 200-year flood event. A combination of preparedness and good luck spared me any significant damages. Houses a few doors South of me were damaged by high winds and falling trees from the (8/4) tornado, while flood waters stopped a mere 20-feet short of my home in September. I was literally writing my story about the tornado (“Riding The Storm Out”) when I realized that the levies had failed and I had to go into a survival mode fast. These events provided first-hand experiences and tests of disaster preparedness that I will share with our readers. This article will focus on the effects of the flood.

Friday September 12th: Heavy rains all day cause some basements to flood and traffic problems. The radio predicts that the rain could exceed to an all time 24-hour record of over 6-inches.

Saturday September 13th: I drive to a gun show in the morning and find sections of US-41 flooded. I make it through, but I am lucky to get back home. The all time record is exceeded and low areas of Chicago and Northwest Indiana begin to flood. The rain pauses that evening.

Sunday September 14th: The remnants of Hurricane Ike bring torrential rains that more than double the previous 100-year record. Retention ponds, levies and pump stations are overwhelmed. The Little Calumet River three blocks down hill from my house passes its 12-foot flood stage and rises past 17-feet.

Virtually all-major and minor roads are closed, including Interstate 80 and 65. I notice that vehicles going North ((towards the river) on my street are turning around and fleeing uphill towards Ridge Road. I am well uphill, so I am not yet too concerned. A few minutes later I go out and look down the street. The water has passed the grammar school only a block away. I turn to see National Guard trucks rumbling past with sandbags and boats. Boats! This cannot be good! I run inside and begin hauling everything (books, records, computers, etc.) up from the basement. The street outside is clogged with fleeing vehicles (refugees) going out and emergency vehicles trying to get in. Boats are ferrying people and pets 2 and 3 blocks from their homes to waiting evacuation busses in front of my house. The nearby hospital and nursing home is in over 10-feet of water within a few

hours. Rain continues and most folks have little time to save belongings. I continue to bring items up from the basement. I have a pond pump that was too large for my pond, but I kept it and I did buy a lot of extra hose for just this kind of situation. I lower it into my sump, just above the sump pump. I then run the cord upstairs and the hose out the door. Now I have a backup pump if the sump pump fails.

Monday September 15th: Although the rain has stopped and the river is reported to be crested, the water continues to creep up the street. Some people who thought they were safe and did not move stuff from their basements lose everything. A garage in the flooded area goes up in flames from a shorted out freezer. The Fire Department has difficulty finding hydrants and reaching the fire. The police ask that the block captains (that's me) conduct security patrols along the edge of the flood zone to spot looters. At 10:00 PM I finally notice that the water has stopped rising. Houses on both sides of me are pumping out their basements, but I have only a few damp spots. My sump pump is running about every 45-seconds and my sewer is gurgling. I start patrolling every hour with my big Maglight and cell phone. We are to call in any suspicious activities in the flood zone.

Tuesday September 16th: Water is receding very slowly. My sump pump is still running every minute and most road are closed.

Wednesday September 17th: I manage to get to work, but it takes 1-½ hours to make the normal 30-minute trip. At exactly 7:20 PM that night, while my wife I and I are fixing dinner, the house is rocked by a terrific explosion. I run outside to see burning debris falling from the sky about a block away. This is a gas explosion. The Fire Department has great difficulty reaching the area that is still under 3-feet of water. The house is completely gone and five nearby homes are also destroyed. I later learn that a cabinet had tipped over in the flood and broken a ¾ flexible gas line. The home's security light timer was set for (you guessed it) 7:20 PM.

Thursday, September 18th: My wife and I patrol all the way down to River Road after dark. Everything is covered in mud. Debris and charred pieces of the exploded house litter yards, streets and hang from trees. There is a unique, musty, damp, sour smell everywhere. Most houses are dark with the dreaded orange (not occupiable) sticker on them.

The Aftermath

Over 1100 homes were severely damaged or ruined. Hundreds of businesses were destroyed. Two major hospitals were closed, put out of service indefinitely and major highways were closed for up to a full week. Damage and costs have run into the hundreds of millions. Local residents and the churches set up disaster recovery centers and were in operation a full week before FEMA got organized. I brought my pressure washer, a load of cleaning supplies and some

cash to one of these centers as soon as the water was down. The next week I volunteered to work, cleaning damaged homes. This work consisted of removing slimy, stinking carpeting, soaked drywall, soggy paneling, soaked insulation, toilets, sinks, furniture and appliances out to the street where big front-end-loaders and trucks hauled it away. You wear masks and gloves. Dust and mud are everywhere. Volunteers in golf carts come by with water and sandwiches every hour. Local people cook meals for the workers. You work with great care. Everything is slippery. Everything has broken glass and exposed nails. You do not want to get cut on this contaminated stuff. Bleach is in big demand. A 10% solution is used in pressure washers and garden sprayers to decontaminate salvageable items, walls, floors, etc.; Cruising scavengers in SUVs and even hand wagons go through the piles of debris. They are not here to help, just to take advantage of others misfortune. Disgusting!

In this event, the perfect storm of three hurricanes met a perfect storm of greed, over-development and governmental mismanagement to create a disaster far beyond anything anticipated. Forty-year residents stated that there had been no serious flooding much past River Road.

Conclusions and Lessons

The great majority of the people affected by this disaster were not prepared. Even I did not consider a flood as near the top of my preparedness list, although I did add an inflatable boat and a spare pump recently. Anything can happen to anyone at any time. Ninety percent of the immediate help came from the victims, their families, the neighbors and the town. This was a very localized disaster, but it overwhelmed the systems. A few points:

1. Never buy a house on or near "River Road". Mine was just far enough towards "Ridge Road" to be safe. But along the top of "Ridge Road" the tornado did its worst.
2. Look at a topographical map. Many houses far into the flooded zone had maniacal damage because they were just a few feet higher than other houses. Mine is two feet higher than my neighbor's.
3. Avoid keeping critical documents in the basement. These were the first things I brought up, but many folks lost critical records to fast rising waters.
4. Keep everything in good Rubbermaid™ tote bins, not cardboard boxes or plastic totes that tend to leak. Even if I had gotten some water, they would have saved a lot. It was easy to grab them and haul all my survival supplies and other items upstairs and stack them quickly.
5. Backup everything. My improvised pump could have saved my basement; I plan to improve it this winter. My generator ran my sump pump and freezer during the 4-day power outage in August. Crank radios, crank

lanterns, candles, stored water, propane stoves all got some use between the tornado and the flood. Of course I had my evacuation packs (in tote bins) ready if needed.

6. If your preparedness and luck spare you from a disaster, it is your duty to help your neighbors and your community in any way you can.

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