

# THE RAPID CITY EXPERIENCE

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Mayor of Rapid City, South Dakota 1971-1975

Mayor of Rapid City during the 1972 Flood

(The following remarks were transcribed from Don Barnett's luncheon speech at the FEMA sponsored **FLASH FLOOD MITIGATION SYMPOSIUM** in Rapid City, SD on **June 9-10, 1987** and edited in September, 2007).

## I. Introduction:

Thank you Mr. Swanson. Friends, federal authorities, regional leaders, and folks from the municipalities. I'm very pleased to be here. It's been fifteen years since our disaster. The Rapid City flood was the second worst in-land flood/disaster in the history of our nation. Second only to the historic Johnstown, PA flood. On a personal level, it's nice to be remembered. I am hopeful some of you will take a message or two to your home communities from this seminar in Rapid City and learn from our mistakes and our examples during the recovery from that terrible and regional disaster in 1972.

It's my privilege to have the opportunity to share a few thoughts with you today about what happened, what we tried to do, and what our intellectual rationale was as we advanced a recovery program following the disaster. Frankly, folks, it was just the damndest thing we ever saw. We always believed floods happen someplace else. That terrible night and the next several months after the flood changed all of us. Disasters happen on a local level. You pull yourself up by your bootstraps, are willing to admit your mistakes, never fear to consider radical solutions, and do

your best. There is the agonizing and constant fear of personal failure.

It was a comprehensive recovery with giant participation by the city council, the county commissioners, the school board members and superintendent, and the private sector. It certainly was NOT Don Barnett alone. I was fortunate to have a college education that was funded by the taxpayers of South Dakota. I relied on my training in public administration and public finance and remembered my training as an administrative officer in the Medical Service Corps in the United States Army and my service as Medical Detachment Commander for 280 personnel at a 400-bed hospital in Vietnam. If I had any leadership abilities, I learned those lessons while serving my country as a commissioned officer in the United States Army. We gave this recovery our best efforts, and that is what I'll share with you today.

Folks, our federal system of government worked effectively in this recovery. The leaders and key decision makers were not faceless federal bureaucrats. They became friends of Rapid City in 1972 and remain close associates today. On the federal level, it was lead by **Robert Rosenheim**, the Regional Director of the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development. He was appointed by President Nixon to be Chairman of the Mountain Plains Council of Federal Agencies in Denver. In terms of old-fashioned politics, this professional had the president's ear. The city council and I were told very early in the recovery. "If you have problem that cannot be solved locally, President Nixon and Mr. Rosenheim will help." And they did. And if instant help was not possible, they told us the reason why and eventually provided the muscle and federal funds to get the job done

**John Swanson** from FEMA in Denver was project manager for that massive federal agency and will be a friend to Rapid City and the Black Hills forever. He understood the

federal cook book and knew where to find the federal dollars to help our city. FEMA and 16 federal agencies provided assistance without overlapping, duplication of effort, and delay in the delivery of human and financial resources to help the survivors. It was necessary for all of to learn the language of the Corps of Engineers, and that's not intended to be critical. The Corps simply had more constraints and congressional mandating than the other federal agencies in the area of flood recovery.

## **II. Thesis**

My purpose today is to share with you some history and some of the terror that we faced on that fateful night and during those months following the flood as local officials put the recovery program together. I will define the theme of this recovery with my sincere hope that you can take this message home as you strive to create public safety on the urban floodplains in America. Rapid City's recovery mode is not the perfect answer to disaster recovery or safety in land use planning on the urban floodplain in your city. You're not going to have pennies (or millions of dollars) fall from heaven and be able to instantly solve your floodplain violations that have occurred over the last 125 years. But if you can gain an understanding of this concept and then copy a few parts of it in your home town, this seminar will prove to be of value to you.

### **Section I. The Urban Floodplain from the era of an "Early Frontier Settlement" up to 1972:**

Shortly after the flood a member of the city council (an incredibly wise and skilled economist on the faculty at the South Dakota School of Mines here in Rapid City) was involved in an oral history project at the Rosebud and Pine Ridge Indian Reservations in southwestern South Dakota. Earl Hausle is his name. He interviewed many of the tribal elders who understood Indian lore and Indian legends about Paha SAPA or the Black

Hills of South Dakota. He spent time on all seven of the Indian reservations in South Dakota and talked to the elderly tribal leaders. I read his reports and I listened to the tapes. He found a theme that went back well over 175 years in the history of the Great Plains and the Black Hills, even before the days of General Custer, before the white folks invaded the sacred Black Hills in search of gold. These tribal elders told Earl how the Indian people, in their wisdom, had chosen not to live in the immediate vicinity of these valleys on the eastern slope of the Black Hills. They had chosen not to live here for three reasons. The Black Hills are very significant as a religious shrine for the gods. The Black Hills are considered so beautiful and a place where only the gods could dwell. The second and third reasons are also profound. The elders said, “Those valleys had too many floods and too many bears.”

From 1876 until about 1940, during the early years of this frontier settlement, hay meadows and farm land were reserved for the low lands along Rapid Creek within the city that is located precisely at the mouth of a large canyon. The site for the city had been selected by the founders (from Denver) because of the wonderful supply of water in Rapid Creek. From 1940 forward, the population of the city rapidly increased due to the location of a new Air Force Base, the completion of Mt. Rushmore, and the arrivals of millions of annual visitors to the Black Hills. It grew from a population of 10,000 to a population of 45,000 over a 30 year period.

During this period of growth, the urban floodplain was changed from agricultural use to residential, commercial, and industrial land use patterns. From a village on the Dakota frontier to a modern city in just thirty years. Remember, folks, that growth included hundreds of violations of every floodplain on the eastern side of the Black Hills. The land use was changing at the base and the bottom of these canyons. Sometimes the city

government made wise decisions on how this land would be utilized. Sometimes the city government made foolish and semi-suicidal decisions relating to zoning on this dangerous floodplain.

## **Section II. The 1972 flood**

On June 9, 1972, fifteen years ago today, about 3:00 in the afternoon, clouds formed on the eastern side of the Black Hills. By 7:30 that evening, we had ourselves a flood. Winds were not available to blow the clouds all over the Black Hills and over the grasslands of Western South Dakota. At 8:30 PM, I issued a warning to the local TV station and the radio stations. However, shortly thereafter, the stations lost electrical power and were off-the-air. Our victims had little warning about the magnitude and potential dangers of the 1972 flood. From that moment throughout the next several days, we lived with sheer terror. Terror in capital letters because the cycle of land use planning that we had permitted on the banks of these creeks was in violation of good common sense. This is not to say that any one mayor or one generation on the city council was guilty of grave sins. All of us, including my administration, were guilty of allowing land use patterns to develop in an area where potential flooding could become a fact of life. A few days later we had 238 reasons why this cycle of land use and bad zoning had turned into such a nightmare. We buried those people.

Leaders in the city and region faced two questions: (1) how can we prevent this from happening again, and (2) how could we help those people who fortunately were lucky enough to survive the disaster of June 9, 1972.

For about two weeks, Rapid City and Black Hills couldn't get off the Walter Cronkite evening news program. We were on the national news every night - 100 dead, 125 dead, 180 dead, 190 dead, 230 dead, 1,820 still missing! You wouldn't believe the

terror and the uncertainty. As all of this happened, tourism stopped. Not only did we have physical peril and loss of life. We also had economic stagnation. It could have become the worst economic calamity during the post-war era with a complete absence of tourism dollars to support the regional economic base.

This might sound like a partisan political statement (but it is not), but we had a fellow from Mitchell, South Dakota who was running for the presidency in 1972. My friend George McGovern was in a fierce contest with President Nixon. Eight days after the flood, Mrs. Nixon came to Rapid City to attend a regional memorial service. She is a fine lady. She came to Stevens High School. 3,500 citizens from the region attended the services. Governor Kneip was the host for this fine lady. In my remarks that painful afternoon, I said to Mrs. Nixon, "You bring the true majesty of America to Rapid City." I had met her the first time two years before the flood when she visited our hospital in Vietnam.

Rapid City now had an advocate in the White House. I will believe to my dying day that, after she returned to the White House, she got Richard Nixon by the nap of the neck and said, "Richard! Don't you dare forget to help those people in Rapid City." I believe that's exactly what happened. She met with dozens of our flood victims and survivors and gave all of us more courage and inspiration than just about anybody I ever knew. The federal taxpayers were generous to the victims of the South Dakota disaster in 1972.

### **Section III. A recovery theme:**

What was the foundation of the recovery? The city council determined that the urban floodplain is a stupid place to sleep but a wonderful place for recreation. The same city council listened to the wisdom of the people. The council had the courage to do something that is extremely **radical. Capital R – Radical!** It never had been tried before.

With the courage of the council and the muscle of state and federal agencies, we had the opportunity to sponsor a program that proved beneficial to the 1972 generation of victims and future generations in Rapid City who will safely enjoy the benefits of an expanded park and recreation system on the urban floodplain within the city. This program had benefits for everybody.

The recovery plan called for the relocation of 1,500 families and roughly 140 businesses from the dangerously low floodplains. This plan was devised by the Public Works Department and their leader, Mr. Leonard Swanson, and improved as the concept benefited from the wisdom of the council and courage of the people.

Frankly, we had loads and tons of grief. But, the city had volumes of courage and brainpower to move forward with this radical plan. The federal agencies climbed on board and pledged to provide the millions of dollars to evacuate the floodplain, buy-out the flood victims, and assist with relocating these victims to new and safe subdivisions and locations where they would not face the annual peril of potential flooding. Our first step was a federal planning grant in the amount of \$300,000 to survey and define the floodplain. (Incidentally, this grant triggered new federal policies to help other cities from ocean to ocean define their urban floodplain and start actions to control development on these potentially suicidal lands.) The city was close to celebrating its centennial event. Within 90 days, we had a plan for the second 100 years of Rapid City's existence.

The most demanding crisis was a plan to financially help the survivors. We had hundreds and hundreds of families who were economically on the brink of financial disaster, let alone the physical loss of life and injury.

We needed wisdom to prevent a disaster of this magnitude from happening again.

The answer was to evacuate the floodplain. Thanks to the wisdom and courage of the city council, we devised a plan to answer question one and question two. Men like Charles Swander, a giant of a man in Rapid City history and founder of Swander's bakery, and others were concerned about public safety for future generations in Rapid City. These people loved their city and took radical action to prevent the loss of life during future flooding events.

Please remember this point: The council did not create a program that would lead to a huge and gigantic waste of federal, state, and local money. Their answer was financially responsible and saved the federal, state, and local units of government millions of dollars by preventing the need to recover from future flooding events on the urban floodplain in Rapid City. This recovery plan is a model for the nation to follow. In other words, the city council refused to apply a patch on the wound, a patch that future generations could scratch off and break.

There was not a single hero in this recovery. The entire program originated with our statutory planning process. The entire community came forward with positive ideas to make the plan better. Our public works director and planning staff fed the stimulating ideas to the people, and the people responded. Nobody had a monopoly on wisdom. The community leaders worked as a cohesive team, and the ideas got better and better. As I said a moment ago, the people had the courage to suggest a recovery mode that was very radical. Please remember the word radical.

We sponsored a radical change in the cycle of land use on the banks of the creeks on the eastern side of the Black Hills. The decision we reached was to physically move the houses; to mitigate, to make a radical change in the pattern of life on both sides of the creek throughout Rapid City. Through a series of federal programs including a \$48

Million grant from the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, we purchased and relocated, over the next six years, 1,500 residential units. In short, we forced these folks to pull up stakes and move to a different neighborhood in Rapid City.

The city government, with the help of the federal government, also purchased and assisted with the relocation of 140 commercial businesses and structures. That is mitigation of the highest order. Our intent was to create an area where future flood waters will have a free flow capacity to start high in the mountains, blast down the canyons, roar through Rapid City, and not harm anybody. The floodplain was cleared, and hundreds of families were relocated to safe areas.

#### **Section IV. The complexities of a floodplain evacuation recovery**

##### **mode:**

Ladies and gentlemen, the urban floodplain is a very nice place to visit. It is a terrible place to sleep. That was and is the continuing theme of the recovery. It is the message the conference sponsors are hoping you will take home to your civic leaders throughout this nation.

We had to decide several things when the program was finally established. One of the first things we had to decide as we pulled together the concept of evacuating the floodplain was the answer to a very, very serious question. We had to ask, "Which generation of ownership had to be relocated?" Let me ask that question again. "Which generation of ownership had to be relocated from the bottom of that dangerous drainage avenue?"

Shortly after the flood one of the flood victims spoke privately with me. I had known him since I was a boy. He came up to me and said, "**Don't do anything fast, Mr. Mayor. Just give me time to sell my home and my land by the creek.**"

Think about what's wrong with that sentence. "Mr. Mayor! Don't do anything fast. Just give me time to sell my damaged home and my land by the creek."

If we listened to that advice, what would happen to the next generation, the buyer, and his family during the next flood? That is the problem. The potential ramifications of that comment from my friend are just horrible. The council decided the generation that had to be relocated was the 1972 generation of folks who lived and slept on the floodplain during the 1972 disaster. Not the next generation. The 1972 generation.

The council voted immediately to adopt these programs. We had public hearings. Some of the journalists in our community won awards from the federal government for their accurate description and writing about these highly complex federal recovery programs, mostly from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The public watched every move we made. And then supported their locally elected officials. There were no secret meetings behind closed doors.

### **The necessity to be radical and do the right thing:**

Earlier this morning in one of the seminars a gentleman wondered why the city embarked on such a radical recovery. His question is on the mark. Aside from the 238 citizens who perished, why did we get so excited about the 1972 flood? Why not just pick up and remove the tons of debris and go on about our business? The city had experienced floods and the loss of life during several serious events since 1876. Why not just clean up the mess and go on about our business?

Mother Nature has provided many warnings to the folks in the city about the dangers of urban flooding. The following is a list of the most serious flooding events between 1876 and 1972.

- 1907: Four city residents were killed in a flash flood.  
1920: Eight city residents were killed in a flash flood.  
1952: Many homes (all varieties) were damaged in a flood. (I was a boy in RC, lived 1.5 city blocks from the creek, and clearly remember the event.)  
1962: Two flooding events during the summer. In the first event, 120 mobile homes were damaged. In the second event, there was more damage that necessitated the evacuation of 1,500 residents from dwellings near the creek.  
**1972: 238 residents of region perished. The total federal funds expended in the recovery were \$170 Million.**

I can remember the 1952 event when I was nine years old. My family lived two blocks from the creek, directly under M-Hill in Rapid City. I walked down by the creek the morning after the flood and watched the volunteers and national guardsmen filling sandbags and doing everything that was humanly possible to keep the flood waters out of our residential neighborhoods. Little did I know that 20 years later I would be mayor during a flood that is recorded as the second worst natural disaster, in terms of in-land flooding, in this history of our nation. Many of my neighbors and friends from back in 1952 perished in the 1972 flood.

A man and his family lived out near Canyon Lake where the 18-hole golf course is now located. I met him early on that terrible Saturday morning in 1972. He said, “Donald! I just about had my **SBA loan from the 1962 flood paid off**. Now, all I own is vacant lot and cold slab of concrete. But my wife and two beautiful daughters are with me to face this nightmare as a family.” That floodplain had a history of terrible flooding, going back for centuries on the eastern side of Paha Sapa. The Indian lore was correct and accurate.

Local lenders had made too many loans to home owners and business owners who invested unwisely on property on or near to the urban floodplain. Mother Nature showed us just how unwise those decisions had been.

### **Pubic Safety:**

Why is floodplain evacuation the best form of mitigation following a disaster that harms the folks and destroys housing? During the early days and hours after the flood, the solution that I have defined today was not that obvious.

Ten days after the flood, the Corps of Engineers sent an officer to a public hearing in Central High School to discuss the construction of a large dam above Canyon Lake that would serve as a flood control dam. Colonel Austin spoke to 1,400 citizens in Central High School and said, "I am here to discuss a possible dam near Dark Canyon or Cleghorn Canyon. Understand right now! The federal government and the Corps of Engineer will never approve funds for a flood control or recreational dam at those locations. The cost/benefit ratio is in the negative, and it is not feasible. I will now answer your questions about a possible dam, but the answer is no!" That settled that! Structures were out of the question.

The elimination of flood control dams as a mode of recovery forced the city to think beyond the traditional solution to a flood. The decision about the financial impossibility of flood control damns, 11 days after the flood, forced the city leaders to be radical, define radical choices, and support radical recovery modes as the local, regional, and national response to the disaster. I am glad we did not build a large dam and allow every business and homeowner to rebuild on the urban floodplain from one end of the city to the other.

If the recovery mode violated the floodplain again, the city would not have a recreational avenue from Dark Canyon on the west side of the city to the fairgrounds on the east. The city would NOT have a recreational avenue going through our city that is five blocks wide and six miles long. And the potential structural wreckage (or failure)

and the environmental damage of a dam failure in some future year could potentially become a nightmare for the future generations in the city.

Remember, folks, Rapid City already had the large (and half empty) Pactola Reservoir that is located about 15 creek miles upstream from the city. However, rains fell between the face of the dam and the city limits line in a 150 square mile area and roared through our city and killed 238 people. The water level at Pactola Dam rose by less than two feet during the night of the 1972 flood. Another dam was not the answer.

With radical relocation of hundreds of flood victims, what are the benefits to the next generation? Let's hope that you will return to your home towns with this message and start a process to make your flood prone areas safe. It might be time in your hometown to relocate a few mobile home parks, a few apartment houses, and several dozen homes from your urban floodplain before the next flood occurs and brings terror, death, and loss of life and property to your city. Do something before the next flood! Future generations will be grateful for your wisdom. If you will begin this mitigation process, before the next disaster, you'll save lives and potential injury for dozens and hundreds of potential flood victims.

When RC made these radical decisions, one of the secondary impacts within our city was a significant economic boom. Homebuilders moved rapidly to replace 1,500 dwelling units. The local economy roared. The influx of federal money had a direct impact upon the city and our business community. Somebody had to replace and provide 1,500 new houses. The building trades in Rapid City during the decade of the 1970s roared with prosperity. Our country went through a terrible recession in the 1970s up to and including the time when Gerald Ford became our president. But not in Rapid City.

The total federal investment in this recovery was approximately \$170 million. This

recovery money was very important to the flood victims and the regional economy. Also, the land adjacent to the cleared floodplain increased in value. New building codes were adopted for the flood fringe (near the floodplain but not excessively low) to require developers to build structures that could withstand flooding. Remember, in the lowest areas of the floodplain, the land is now used for park and recreational activities. Nobody sleeps there. The floodplain fringe is still used and occupied for some commercial land use patterns. However, new structures must be built to a higher standard. The damaged homes and structures represented roughly 15% of the tax base in the city. Within a very few years, the tax base was larger and generating more revenue than before the flood. Today, the city is prospering, and the population is increasing. Quality of life issues have attracted thousands of new citizens to the city and the region.

The quality of life in the city radically improved because of what the planners and recreation people call a “recreational avenue” that stretches all the way through town, five blocks wide and six miles long. This means every residential neighborhood in this community of 44,000 has high proximity to acres upon acres upon acres of prime recreational areas on both banks of the creek throughout the city. Just think what that does to the quality of life! From little league fields to hiking fields to ball fields to soccer fields, the new golf course, all the way through town, for this generation and the next generation to enjoy. And if the city has high water tomorrow, the taxpayers will pay to repair the park and recreational facilities on the floodplain. But there won't be a run on coffins at the funeral homes! Every neighborhood has close proximity to park and recreational activities. The property values in the vicinity of the long lineal park increased. The tax base was restored with much new construction. This led to a higher quality of life, and future generations will have this magnificent floodplain- - that is now

back in its original native condition- - to visit and enjoy. Yes, friends, the floodplain is a stupid and terrible place to sleep. It is a grand and wonderful place to visit.

**Safety for Future Generations: It is our responsibility.**

In the disaster mitigation business, you and I who are interested in the safety for future generations. However, we must have allies. We need assistance in educating municipal decision makers about the folly of violating the floodplains in the radical ways that the City Government of Rapid City had violated our floodplains before June 9, 1972. Planning professionals must show your home communities the methodologies to avoid violating your urban floodplains in the identical ways that Rapid City, South Dakota had violated our floodplains from 1876 to 1972.

We need help from the educational community. City planners, engineers, and city finance administrators must understand the urgency of addressing zoning and development issues on lands in major drainage areas in every city in America. We must educate our city councils about the folly and the potential suicidal dangers of living in our floodplains and creating residential and commercial uses in areas that are dangerously low. During that summer of 1972 we talked in theoretical terms about the mythical “100-year flood”. In the last 100 years, Rapid City has had more than one “100-year flood”. You can play vocabulary games and you can play with the definition of terms. However, the simple point is clear. When you violate the floodplain, and if you have a massive storm, there will consequences to that folly. Please remember the Rapid City example. The magnitude of the clouds on that afternoon and evening in early June was normal for a large spring rain storm. However, the serious problem related to the absence of winds to blow those clouds all over the Black Hills and all over western South Dakota. The clouds dripped dry in an area of 150 square miles upstream from the city. Gravity flows prevailed. The

families on the floodplain paid the price.

We need a national educational process - through our universities, training seminars, and from municipal and governmental officials. Please take these messages to your colleges and your universities. Add this training to the institutions of higher education that train and prepare city planners and civil engineers. Please benefit from Rapid City's bad example in planning long before your next flood. And benefit from the wisdom of the Rapid City Council as they evacuated the floodplain to provide safety for future generations.

We have potential allies in this battle. My mother said, "Dr. Jonas Salk taught us better than anybody. 'Prevent polio before you have the need to cure it.'" The same wisdom relates to floodplain safety. The cities in the middle part of the United States are about 100-125 years old. The cities in Europe are hundreds of years old. Ours is a very young country. Let's save ourselves some money and manage this low and dangerous drainage areas with wisdom and foresight.

**Your best potential ally: The lenders:**

Our best ally should be the lenders. These are the sophisticated people with money. If they have the opportunity to make a loan in the floodplain, and the loan can only be made because of the availability of federal flood insurance program, that loan should not be made. The application should be rejected. That lender should have the sophistication and the foresight to put aside his desire for short term profits. He knows very well that the next generation of occupants of that apartment house, that mobile home park, the homeowners in that subdivision will be harmed, injured, or killed if a major event occurs on that very low land. Stop that development before it endangers future generations. If the banker is dumb enough or greedy enough to make the loan, he is making a moral and

ethical decision that may lead to disastrous results for the borrower. Period, case closed. And we should work with our responsible developers before the nails are driven in that subdivision. Ask that developer to find safe lands for his project, and then give him all of the encouragement possible to build his project in an area that will never experience flooding. That is wisdom, folks. Wisdom of the highest caliber.

I worked with ten folks on the Rapid City Common Council who had a lot of wisdom and foresight. **The finest group of men and I women I have ever had the good fortune to know.**

I enjoyed a little political tête â tête from time to time with some of the board members and the president of the biggest savings and loan in Rapid City. One more story, please. The council members and I had a lot of terrible things on our minds during the first few weeks after the flood in 1972. The President of that large Savings and Loan Association had a lot on his mind too. The assets on hundreds of loans he had made were gone, were being trucked to the city landfills, and many of his customers were dead or injured. **The collateral for hundreds of loans was virtually gone.** Over 1,200 mortgages and apartment house loans and mobile home loans were in danger of instant default. The President and his board had to report to their stockholders. The S and L might fail and be forced to close up shop. This particular S and L had over 600 mortgages—and 600 customers who might “throw in the towel” and financially default. These economic and political powers applied forceful political pressures upon me and the city council and begged for a governmental bail-out. Any kind of federal or state bail-out. Remember! They had made the loans in first place. They had taken their capitalistic risk. **Now, as rock-rib Republicans, they were begging for a bail-out.**

The foundation of the recovery plan was a program sponsored by the Small

Business Administration that provided 30-year term, 1% interest loan to the home owners and business owners who were purchased and relocated with the \$48 million urban renewal program. This funding included hard dollars to enable the flood victims to pay off the balance of their original mortgages on their damaged property and funds to purchase and acquire a new home in a safe location. Without the generosity of the federal taxpayers, this floodplain evacuation program would not have been financially possible. The first loans and relocations were underway by January of 1973, eight months after the flood. It required approximately six years to complete the relocations.

The President of that Savings and Loan Association told me his total loss from the 1972 flood was eventually less than \$100,000. This was true because the local, state, and federal taxpayers provided a bail-out program to enable the flood victims to pay off their original mortgage and borrow new funds (with a federal or SBA guarantee on each loan) to purchase and finance replacement housing.

In terms of old-fashioned economics, the federal treasury bailed out that savings and loan and other lenders in the Black Hills who had made foolish loans on floodplain lands in Rapid City and elsewhere. How long will the federal government- -the federal taxpayers- - be willing bail out mistakes of this magnitude? In future years, the taxpayers and their congressmen and United States Senators may not be willing to provide federal bailouts for every disaster in this land.

The Red Cross is so generous and helped all of our victims with hard cash during the early days and weeks after the disaster. But there are limits regarding how much and how often the Red Cross can arrive with funds to help victims who are in their personal predicament because of bad zoning, bad planning, and foolish violations of urban floodplains.

We must look to allies in the financial community to help government in general, local planners, and those interested in the next generation do some prevention and stop these violations before they continue to harm our nation.

There's another group of people that should be on our side. **They're the public safety professionals, the policeman and firemen.** The council and I were never able to count the number of folks the public safety professionals saved that terrible night. But the price was equally terrible. We lost three firemen and one lady on the Rapid City Police Reserve. And we lost several members of the South Dakota National Guard who were equally heroic that terrible night.

If our nation continues to violate urban flood prone areas, we will lose more policemen and more firemen. I attended those funerals. Its breaks your heart to see such suffering and trauma. Let's use a little common sense and wisdom regarding land use planning in low drainage areas and prevent the need to send public safety professionals to their death during future disasters. Again, why not use a little bit of common sense right now and prevent that carnage from happening again?

### **The Corps of Engineers: Friend or foe?**

The Corps of Engineers can be your ally and/or your enemy. The Corps will sometimes make foolish decisions that disregard public safety on the urban floodplain. They will cave in to political pressure and provide a false sense of security with dams, berms, levees, dikes, and channelization projects that provide only temporary or cosmetic solutions to potential dangers on the floodplain. Maybe the Corps of Engineers should not divert water from one side of the creek to the other without taking into consideration the long-term ramifications of the false sense of security that the structures may promise.

The City of Rapid City had the opportunity to apply to the Corps of Engineers for

funds for a large scale concrete channelization project to concentrate future flood waters in a concrete ditch (just the way they do in the City of Las Angeles). We never filled out the application or gave that suggestion one moment of serious contemplation. Nothing will ever compare with the beauty and high utilization of the greenway park in Rapid City. This recreation avenue is enjoyed by thousands of folks and is the most beautiful public park on the Great Plains.

The taxpayers are our best and biggest allies in the mitigation process. Your job and my job is to convince other communities to use their urban floodplains safely in future years. **This may require a 10-15- or 20-year term to acquire and relocate high density residential projects that are now located on urban floodplains throughout the nation. Remember!** "Mitigation" is the theme if this seminar. Let us be the leaders in taking action before the next flood, before the next disaster, and before the loss of life from similar flooding events. If we show a little courage today, we will save the taxpayers billions in the future and save lives with the same programs. I am not talking about millions of dollars in savings. I am talking about BILLIONS. With a little foresight, a little prevention right now, a little mitigation - buying and relocating homes from dangerously low areas, we save money, property, and human life.

But there's another segment to my remarks today. Please don't wait for the perfect solution to your local challenge in creating safe uses for your urban floodplains. Take a few small steps now and adopt a long term program to get the job done.

Tomorrow you will tour the Rapid City floodplain and see some structures that we just could not purchase and relocate. You will see a large shopping center, only a short distance from the peaceful waters of Rapid Creek (with a modest wetland channel behind the parking lot). There was not enough money to clear and evacuate all of the floodplain.

But we did the best we could with the revenues that were available. You will see an agricultural terminal, an elevator that employs many dozens of people, that is in the floodplain. We did not have enough money to buy and relocate this business. However, we purchased and relocated dozens of businesses and hundreds of homes (on lower lands) in that general area. The answer in Rapid City is not the perfect answer.

As I travel this nation, I ask myself why? Why do we foolishly locate so many mobile home parks on the banks of so many streams and rivers? Why do we condemn those people to live in mobile homes on lands so low and so near to suicidal floodplains? The morning after the 1972 flood many flood victims told me they could not even locate their destroyed mobile homes. Those dwelling units were busted and battered. Some were never found. Please take this message home. Start with the lowest mobile home parks and purchase and relocate the occupants to safe geographic areas where they will not experience future flooding.

### **Conclusion:**

Today I've tried to define some of the practical examples of what was on our minds and in our hearts as we designed a recovery plan in Rapid City in the summer of 1972. I've tried to have you review this seriously flawed cycle of land use planning in the urban floodplain and how this little village went from hay meadows on the creek sides to a modern city of 50,000; from hay meadows to asphalt parking lots; from agricultural use to mobile home parks; from horse pastures to shopping centers; from occupancy to an open space and a floodplain park system that is unmatched in America. I've tried to stimulate you to think about which generation of occupants must be relocated if we are to prevent loss of life and property during the next flooding event.

Eight days after our large 1972 disaster, RC had a second flood. Two people

perished as they tried in vain to speed through a low drainage area on the south side of our city. The raging waters carried their vehicle over a barrier. It is another example of bad zoning, bad planning, bad use of low areas, and two innocent victims were lost.

My example for you folks today is simply this. It doesn't have to be a national disaster with massive loss of life and millions of dollars in property before you can wake up and do something to eliminate dangers on the urban floodplain. It takes fortitude, courage, and a willingness to dare. If you're willing to do that, I think you're fit to be public officials. You are fit to carry on these gigantic challenges facing us as we worry about the safety of future generations along streams and rivers in urban America.

Hubert Humphrey was my hero. I won't apologize for that ever. Hubert Humphrey said he would have hated to live without offending somebody. There is a lot of good sense and wisdom in those words. He wanted to offend the bigots and the racists in American society. Please be courageous as your planning commissions set a pattern for safe land use in your cities and town. Show courage. Save life and property. And don't be afraid to offend and oppose those who would build unsafe structures on your urban floodplains.

If we can show that type of courage, I believe we can live by that adage that was written by Norman Cousins several years ago. Norman Cousins said, and it's my favorite quotation of all time. It is my philosophy of life. He said, "Optimism provides the basic energy of civilization." If we can have that optimistic attitude and a firm commitment to the concepts we have discussed today, then we are meeting our responsibilities in the areas where our professions have taken us. Norman Cousins said it far more clearly than I ever could. "Optimism does provide the basic energy of civilization and pessimism is just a waste of time."

Thank you very much.

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