

Comments by Don Barnett, Mayor of Rapid City, 1971-75.

Mr. Barnett addressed questions asked of him by students at Waubay Junior High School.

MEMO

6-4-07

Dear Friends in [Waubay](#) and the scholars in Waubay Junior High School:

Thank you so much for your note and your interest in the 1972 disaster in Western South Dakota. Your questions are on target and certainly address some of the horrific challenges that my generation of public servants and the citizens of the region faced during the painful aftermath of that historic flood. And historic it was. Last year, I read a list of the worst in-land disasters relating to flooding in the history of our nation. These do not include hurricanes. The flood that killed the largest numbers of people was in Johnstown, PA. You can Google it up for the terrible details and history of that event. David McCullough wrote the best history about that event. It should be in your library or you can obtain a copy thru inter-library-loan. It would make good summer reading. The in-land flood that killed the second highest number of victims in the history of our nation was the Rapid City flood in June, 1972. The South Dakota Event was, in deed, historic.

Now, your questions. After some thought, I have decided to number each of your questions and answer them out of the order that you presented. I will number each answer accordingly.

2. What were the major problems faced by the city after the flooding. .

It was a night of absolute terror. But the facts of the matter did not come to our mind instantly. The Police Department alerted me about 6:30 that the United States Weather Service had alerted the Police Department about the dangers from potentially high waters on Rapid Creek during the next several hours. This warning was not unusual. Storms and gully-washers are common in the Black Hills every summer. I called my best advisor, Mr. Leonard Swanson, the City Public Works Director, and we met at City Hall. Heavy rains were falling, and Mr. Swanson and I drove to Canyon Lake Park where a city worker and his family lived in the park caretaker's home, immediately below the dam. Swanny ordered the caretaker, a Parks Department employee, to immediately take his family, leave their evening meal on the table, and get out of the park. The entire family survived the flood. Not a trace of the home (it was city property) or the contents was ever found. The Canyon Lake Dam failed a few hours later. Swanny started to assemble his department heads and I remained on the west side of town. By shortly after 7:00 pm on that Friday evening, the water in Rapid Creek was roaring down the canyon between RC and Pactola Reservoir.

A friend of mine (a dear friend who attended the church where my family were also members), was working on a shut-off valve for a major gas main that served homes above Canyon Lake. I got out of my car and helped his crew pull on a big wrench. It was about five feet long. We were soaked. As his men tightened the valve, the manager of the gas company put his arm around my shoulder and he said, "Mr. Mayor! Somebody could get killed in this thing." The

"thing" was the early moments of the flood. It was an understatement. The crew, Mr. George Miller, and I watched a car float down Rapid Creek from just below the State Fish Hatchery and crash into the bridge above Canyon Lake. Minutes later, the bridge failed and the car and debris floated into Canyon Lake.

I had a police radio in my city car, and it also enabled me to monitor the radio traffic for the South Dakota Highway Patrol. It was a racket. A highway patrolman was begging for help near the small town of Black Hawk where Box Elder Creek was flooding over the highway. He desperately needed a boat to rescue some folks who were stranded in their car in the creek. By this time, the small creek was a raging river. This is the creek that drains an area north and west of the city and eventually runs near Ellsworth Air Force Base. It does not run through Rapid City.

I rushed to a nightclub called the Canyon Lake Club and, en route, I radioed to the Police Chief and asked him to meet me at a phone booth by the parking lot. He arrived at the same time I did. We instantly agreed that I should issue a warning to the biggest radio station and TV station in the city, and I would ask that station to call the other stations with the same warning. It was about 8:30 PM (if my memory after all of these years is correct). The newsman at the station understood the urgency of the moment and recorded my warning. I asked the folks to immediately evacuate from all of the neighborhoods near Rapid Creek and from every area in the city that had a history of local flooding. I then remembered the distress for the highway patrolman near Black Hawk and closed the alert with a request for anybody who lived on the west side of town to drag a boat to the bridge over Box Elder Creek (near the old dog racing track) and meet the highway patrolman there.

The radio and TV interrupted their programming, issued the warning, and ran it almost continuously for about 30 minutes. The engineer also called the other radio stations and asked them to make a recording of my voice and run the warning non-stop. They stations cooperated.

Unfortunately, about 35- - or maybe longer- - minutes after my first warning, the TV station and radio stations lost their electrical power and went "off the air." They did not broadcast again until the next morning.

Now the instant problems:

1. Uncertainty.

At dawn the next morning, the clouds settled down to ground level, and a heavy fog covered all of Rapid City. The meteorologists later reported that the absence of winds at certain elevations had caused the heavy rain clouds between Pactola Reservoir and the city to hang in the canyons and literally drip-dry during the night. Cells of up to 17 (some say 15 inches but I have official reports in my files that claim 17 inches fell in certain regions) inches of rain fell in the canyons, and the water gravitated to Rapid Creek. The damaged areas along Rapid Creek in the city were about six miles long and six blocks wide. Experts said the roaring were moving at about 30 miles per hour. It looked like a war zone. We knew we had heavy casualties, but we did not have any idea about the eventual number (238).

Civil Defense under South Dakota law is a function of county government. During the night, the County Commissioners set up the central control point in the courthouse. By 5:00 in the morning, those survivors who could travel to the courthouse started to arrive and gave the sheriff's office crew (the dispatcher, the jail attendant, a few deputies and volunteers, and the civil defense office staff) the names of family members and friends who were missing. The commissioners and a few staff started accumulating the lists of the missing persons. I stopped at the courthouse about 7:00 after I was able to drive the city car from the north side of the creek over a partially destroyed bridge to the south side of the creek. The look on the faces of the folks who were reporting missing family members is still framed in my memory. They feared the absolute worst but were praying for miracles. Many broke down in the temporary offices with worry and fear.

Words cannot define this fear and suffering. It was heartbreaking. Later in the morning, more volunteers arrived to help write down hundreds of names. With nobody to blame, it became a very confusing situation. The business college in RC is across the street from the courthouse. A man from the college saw the crisis and volunteered to permit the civil defense professionals from the county and state to use the computers at the business school and combine all of the names on dozens of lists and print a consolidated list of the missing persons. Volunteer computer and key punch operators were available to type the lists while the number of names was increasing rapidly. By noon (if my memory is correct) the number was over 1,500. The list grew longer through the next three days. However, there was order to the process, and the civil defense folks and the county commissioners were doing a good job. For the next several weeks the highest priority for city government and the county government was to manage the missing list. The degree of personal uncertainty for hundreds of families was sheer agony. The county commissioners appointed a retired military man to manage that list, and he was real pro. By the end of the summer, the list was down to five names.

2. Bodies:

Throughout the night and during the early morning hours, the police radio was reporting to the dispatcher the shocking and terrible facts of the matter. The police were finding many bodies along Rapid Creek. By this time, the waters had flooded the lower level of City Hall, power was off, and the dispatcher and Police Chief drove a police car to the top of a hill inside the city. That car was the central dispatch point for the police department. However, the Police Department could not receive telephone messages from the citizens of Rapid City. Almost all of our off-duty policeman reported for work during the night and worked with the night shift in the neighborhoods near the creek. Also, our city had a police reserve of volunteers who sometimes helped out the department with crowd management and important services in the routine life of our city. We were in the middle of a long campaign to control drunken drivers, and these volunteers always played a big role in public safety issues in our city. These men and women also reported for duty. Sadly, a lady in the police reserve perished that terrible night as she was saving others.

I drove to the west side of town near the Meadowbrook Golf Course and met Dr. Larry Lytle, the President of the City Council. He was standing beside a police car that was towing a

rental trailer. It was filled with bodies. Dr. Lytle was leading a group of volunteers and flood survivors who were retrieving bodies from the rubble in the neighborhoods near the creek, the golf course, and Meadowbrook School. I radioed the police chief, but he had already heard about the trailer idea. All of our surviving police cars (less than ten) went to the trailer rental business and used U-Haul trailers for the next two or three days. The county civil defense office and Mr. Behrens, the County Coroner, managed the distribution of the bodies to the various funeral homes for the next several weeks. It was a county function.

Of course, during every hour of the crisis, Sheriff Glen Best and his deputies worked closely with the police and volunteers in the rural areas surrounding the city to search for survivors and deliver the victims to the funeral homes. It was an on-going process for many, many days. Glen and his force worked in the city and county and provided great service.

3. City Employees. Several were lost.

The fire chief and his men had worked gallantly all night to save the folks from the raging waters in the creek. The chief informed me over a police radio that three of his men were missing. We were not near each other. Chief Johnson and his men were heroic throughout the night and saved dozens of people. I was with one crew on the east side of town near Roosevelt Park. The firemen and several men from the South Dakota National Guard were using ropes and ladders to save the folks from the raging (and very cold) waters. These courageous actions saved dozens of victims from the flooding waters that also contained debris, parts of homes, mobile homes, and other materials that clogged the bridges. The diverted waters roared into neighborhoods far distant from the creek. Many bridges broke apart. The roar of the noise can only be compared to a terrible train wreck.

By Saturday noon the Chief told me the names of the missing men. The body of the third firemen was not found until four or five later, several blocks downstream from Canyon Lake in Sioux Park.

4 The South Dakota National Guard.

By a fortunate coincidence, the SD National Guard had assembled in Rapid City for their normal summer encampment and were at Camp Rapid on the west side of Rapid City on that Friday evening. Under the leadership of General Corning, the men instantly moved into a highly professional and courageous rescue mode. They moved bulldozers, cranes, trucks, and other equipment to the banks of Rapid City and saved dozens and dozens of victims. I had nothing to do with the assignment or use of these men, but they are highly disciplined and well trained and worked absolute wonders during the night and throughout the next several weeks. Without the National Guard in Rapid City and the Black Hills, the number of casualties would have been far higher. However, the price was high. Several Guardsmen were killed as they put their life on the line to rescue and help perfect strangers. This service is in the highest traditions of the South Dakota National Guard and the people of our state. Every citizen of South Dakota felt the pain.

5. Housing.

By mid-morning on Saturday, the water in Rapid Creek was back in the stream and the period of high water was over. However, the flood was not over! The county commissioners

and civil defense workers were bringing order to the courthouse. Regional and national reporters had word of the disaster and were arriving by the dozens by 7:00 that morning. Also, Governor Kneip, his senior staff, and many state civil servants were arriving in Rapid City by convoy from Pierre. Federal officials from Denver were in Rapid City by mid-afternoon. The airport had electrical power and was operating for both private planes and commercial carriers.

The missing list was our highest priority. From time to time, I'd meet a city council member, and we would discuss where the survivors would sleep the first night and how long it would take to repair some of the damaged homes. Nobody had a plan or a strong sense of direction on this issue.

During the same hours, local Red Cross workers and national leaders of the Red Cross arrived in Rapid City to help. The President of the Red Cross arrived from Washington on Sunday and supervised a system to pass out funds to the survivors. His name was George Easley, and he had been on President Truman's staff in the White House for years. I see his name in the history books. He told me in early July that the Red Cross had passed out over \$200,000 to the disaster survivors, no strings attached. He is a great friend to Rapid City.

The local commander of the Salvation Army and his wife were heroic throughout the night. Sadly, the commander was killed while driving his pickup into the waters to carry more folks to safety. His wife, in a state absolute grief, asked me to make the city auditorium (where the Dahl Fine Arts Building is now located) available to the Salvation Army, and they would provide meals for the survivors. Wes Storm, the city recreation director, had the key and within two or three hours an army of volunteers were serving hot meals. They managed the building throughout the summer and fed thousands. The regional Commander from St. Louis became my friend and told me the Salvation Army provided 27,000 meals during the first few days after the flood.

5. Early decisions:

Federal officials arrived in Rapid City by Saturday noon and promised to build several mobile home parks and provide new mobile homes for hundreds of victims. This was a good plan but it would take time. Many survivors returned to their destroyed homes and found only vacant lots. Many homes were totally destroyed and unfit for occupancy. Frankly, I don't know where those folks slept the first few weeks. Families, friends, and strangers stepped forward to provide assistance.

On Saturday evening, we had an emergency meeting of the city council and the council courageously announced some firm and very controversial decisions. First, the city would not issue building permits to repair homes that were over 50% damaged. We needed time to reach some conclusions for the long-term recovery. Of course, some folks repaired their homes without a permit. Secondly, the city would not permit federal funds to be used to repair mobile home parks that were dangerously close to Rapid Creek. As the death toll increased, we were told that some survivors could not even find their mobile homes. The homes had been broken to bits by the raging water.

6. Utilities:

The in-take system at the water treatment plant (where water from the creek was normally prepared and treated for public consumption) near Rapid Creek had been severely damaged. The city could not provide potable water. Most of our wells were flooded and contaminated. Water lines had ruptured, and several of the city reservoirs had drained dry. We had a serious potential health problem on our hands.

Nobody in the city was surprised when citizens from every community in the Black Hills arrived in Rapid City with trailers and a wide variety of containers filled with potable water. The National Guard set up points in the city to provide drinking water to the entire city and used several military potable water trailers. With sound leadership, these men worked with these volunteers, set up potable water distribution points, and provided safe water to our citizens. For homes where water pressure was still available, the folks were told by the civil defense leaders to boil the water before drinking. Within a few days, electricity and natural gas service was restored to some neighborhoods. There was not a secondary episode of water born disease in the flooded city or region. The council authorized emergency expenditures for repairs to the water and sewer plant.

In short, the disaster was managed by the County Civil Defense Department, but it was the city's job to restore normal public or city services including, water, sewer service, open roads and bridges, police and fire and public safety, and routine government services. Our 450 civil servants and the Pennington County employees worked day and nights for several weeks to bring their departments back on line. The price was very high. Two of our public works employees also perished during that terrible night while saving others in the neighborhoods where they lived.

The city had two hospitals, and one was located near the creek on the west side of town. It had lost electrical power. I arrived at that hospital about 6:30 Saturday morning. A man had driven his Winnebago to the hospital and was providing temporary electrical power from his little generator for emergency use inside the structure. The patients were later discharged to their homes or transferred to the larger hospital that had not lost electrical power. This facility became the main point to provide care for hundreds of the injured volunteers and flood survivors. The nurses and staff provided wonderful care. Most of the doctors in the city reported to St. John's hospital to manage triage and provide instant care for the victims and volunteers. I never heard one complaint about the quality of care that was provided at that overburdened hospital.

7. Physical and Emotional Strain.

By Sunday night, the pressures were taking a toll on the elected officials from both the city and the country. Housing demand and the missing persons list were overwhelming the local leaders. However, it was at this moment that a wise man made a historic suggestion. Leonard Swanson, a veteran of World War II and a registered Professional Engineer with a degree from South Dakota State, was Public Works Director. All of us looked to "Swanny" for advice and direction. He is, beyond a doubt in my mind, the most compassionate and highly skilled civil servant that I have ever known. And a great friend to this day. At a moment of pure exhaustion, when the pressures for housing and a theme of recovery were most

pronounced and severe, the city council and I met in the courthouse and just about made a terrible mistake. The federal folks and the many local folks wanted the city to repair the mobile home parks near the creek and begin using the new mobile homes that were rolling into the Black Hills from all over the Great Plains (under FEMA's management and control) and were parked at Ellsworth Air Force Base). We just about made the decision to allow folks to move back into the mobile home parks near Rapid Creek. Swanny said, "**We cannot sentence the survivors to one more night near the creek in the suicidal floodplain.**" I wrote his comments down in my spiral binder. We were shocked. His comments meant the city would never permit the homes that were near the creek to be repaired and occupied again.

The council was unanimous in their support. Mr. Swanson's comment became the first rule and the primary theme of our recovery. It would be too stupid to rebuild hundreds of destroyed or damaged homes by the creek and allow the survivors to return to their dangerous residential lots in the deepest areas of the Rapid Creek floodplain. Lt. Tommy Hennies of the RCPD drove Swanny home to finally get a few hours of sleep, but he was back in the saddle the next morning.

E. Economics

The national reporters were reporting the disaster thoroughly and professionally. However, by Sunday, the level of tourism and visitor numbers at Mt. Rushmore was drastically down. We faced the potential of a second disaster with a complete collapse of the 1972 tourism system. Folks from throughout the nation believed the highways to Mt. Rushmore and the Black Hills were under water. We needed a plan and needed it fast.

Governor Kneip and his staff saw the problem, went to work, and provided state funds for an immediate national and regional advertising campaign to advise the nation that the Black Hills were open for business. This campaign had a significant economic impact upon the entire state. We also asked the regional and national reporters to put out the word that the Black Hills could not survive a second disaster if visitors failed to visit South Dakota in 1972. We received wonderful cooperation.

Mr. John Palmer was the morning newsman on the Today Show over NBC, and he had covered the flood for two or three days. He asked me to do a live interview at 5:00 one morning during the first week from the studios at KOTA. We talked about the disaster for a few minutes and then he gave me 12 minutes of broadcast time to talk about tourism. It was free advertising for South Dakota, and I explained that the interstate highways, state highways, and the major attractions were safe and open for business. We received hundreds of inquiries at the office, and Mrs. Kay Rippentrop, the long-time Mayor's Assistant, answered every request for materials. The State Department of Tourism also answered thousands of requests for travel information and poured more money into advertising. Little by little, the number of visitors returned to about 90% of normal by the 4th of July. From that point forward, it was a banner year.

Number Two:

How did Rapid City, the State of South Dakota, and the federal government work together to help rebuild the areas damaged in the 1972 disaster?

As explained above, the federal officials from FEMA, (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) arrived in Rapid City by noon on Saturday. I must not fail to define the skill of these wonderful civil servants. President Nixon had appointed very strong and talented folks to manage this important federal agency. These were not political hacks. These were skilled and compassionate folks, and they brought along the financial muscle of the federal treasury and the firm direction by Congress to help regions that were defined as Federal Disaster areas. President Nixon defined Rapid City and the four-county disaster zone as a national disaster on Saturday morning, and the federal folks arrived to help.

Debris removal and body search were key components of their duties. The Corps of Engineers was instantly available to manage debris removal and hired local and regional contractors to haul debris to an old city quarry on the west side of town in South Canyon and the city landfill on the east side of town. The feds were paying the bills and calling the shots and the locally elected leaders were keeping out of the way. By Sunday, these contractors were making real progress. In the process, the crews found more bodies. It was gruesome duty with plenty of tears by all of us, including the city's 29-year old mayor.

The federal government divides the nation into several regions to administer federal programs. In Denver, the Mt. Plains Council of Federal Agencies (16 cabinet level agencies) was led by Mr. Robert Rosenheim, the regional Director of Housing and Urban Development. These agencies meet frequently to cohesively manage their duties and attempt to avoid overlapping, duplication, waste, and delay in the delivery of federal services. Representatives of these agencies arrived in Rapid City, went on TV, and told the folks how the federal government would help. However, it was not a cohesive message and all of it was confusing to local officials and the general public. They were speaking "federalese", and most of us did not even understand the terms of the discussion. The federal agencies had never before managed an in-land disaster of this magnitude, and many of the officials were just "winging it," - just like most of us on the local level. On Sunday night, I met with Mr. Rosenheim and asked him to return to Denver a get a plan together. We could not understand the alphabetical soup programs that these folks were discussing, and we had dozens of local and pressing issues to manage. Bob understood immediately and gathered the federal officials together and returned to Denver.

Bob told me a most interesting story. The next morning, in Denver, a letter from President Nixon arrived at Bob's office. Mr. Rosenheim was designated by President Nixon to be the federal lead man for all federal actions relating to the National Disaster in South Dakota. Bob was given unusual authority to speak for the President as he coordinated the federal response from 16 federal agencies that are based in Denver. He brought order to the chaos and carried that letter in his suit pocket for several years. When there was a dispute among the federal agencies, Bob sorted it out and the other senior Nixon appointees understood that any appeal to Washington would be overruled by the President. The entire federal response was both generous and effective. The agencies met around the clock until they had a plan.

Later that week, Bob called me and we agreed to meet the next morning for breakfast.

It is critical to understand that the flood did not just impact Rapid City. Areas in four counties were damaged, and the elected officials from those jurisdictions provided wisdom and insight in the general theme of the recovery. They had urgent and pressing needs that also required local, state, and federal attention. It was imperative for the plan to involve every unit of local government that was impacted by the 1972 flood.

Larry Finnerty, an engineer who worked for the City, joined me and Mr. Swanson for the breakfast meeting with Mr. Rosenheim. After an hour or two of serious listening, Larry drew a sketch on the back of a napkin to show how the Mr. Plains Council of 16 Federal Agencies in Denver would work closely with elected leaders from the Four County Disaster Area. It was simple, understandable, and a profoundly wise concept. We shook hands, and the birth of the recovery plan was in place. Larry refined the chart, and we shared copies with all of the local officials in the four-county area, the newspaper, TV and radio stations, reporters, and the planning started to take place. The chart was just for discussion until it could be approved by each unit of local government. After several regional meetings, the approvals were in place, and local officials continued the management of serious planning procedures. The plan accomplished the mission. The mission was to help the victims as rapidly as possible, create programs to prevent the loss of life and property in future disasters, and move forward without overlapping, duplication, and delay in the delivery of federal, state, and local services. Governor Kneip signed off on the plan with his approval. The governor also immediately briefed the leaders of the legislature, and there was little protest. A man on the governor's staff, Herb Teske, remained in Rapid City for the entire summer and was the governor's right hand man. He was also a Colonel in the National Guard and worked closely with General Corning to keep the National Guard Commander informed on each stage of the recovery in the early weeks of that terrible summer.

There was one agency that was much more cumbersome. The Corps of Engineers has tremendous power and authority and seems to be independent of congress and sometimes even the President. The leaders of the Corps of Engineers in Omaha never joined with the other federal agencies in our "treaty" but they did provide strong service to South Dakota. At first, that service was mostly the coordination of debris removal. That process went along as well as could be expected. The feds and FEMA paid for all of it. On other issues, the Corps was arbitrary and would not agree to the target dates and policies that were part of the plan Mr. Rosenheim and his staff had prepared. We worked through these issues over the next few years. The last component of the recovery plan to be implemented by the Corps of Engineers is the preserved wetland area behind the Baken Park Shopping Center and south of the new West Main Bridge. The Corps came through in the end and did their job.

Question Number Three: How did the HUD (Housing and Urban Development) housing program work?

As defined above, by Sunday night the council had agreed to keep the flood victims out of the floodplain until the major theme of the recovery could be worked out by all of the governmental agencies. However, the city council had two terrible and pressing issues on

their minds and hearts: 1, How do we financially help the survivors? 2, How can government create policies and programs and a theme of recovery to prevent similar disaster from happening again, and how can government prevent the loss of life in future floods in the urban floodplain in Rapid City? Here is the foundation of both questions:

1. The survivors, like most Americans, had mortgages on their homes and those monthly payments had to be paid. Hundreds of homes were virtually gone or in a condition where they could never be repaired. The survivors also required new and safe housing. Within a few weeks, the FEMA mobile home parks were operational, and hundreds of families moved into the new mobile homes. However, these were temporary homes and not the answer to the long term housing shortage. The survivors were living with their family members, in the homes of their friends, in motels, and trying to repair their damaged homes as rapidly as possible.

2. The floodplain in Rapid City has a long history of flooding, and lives had been lost during several previous floods.

A. 1907: Four lives lost in a flash flood. Canyon Lake destroyed.

B. 1920: Eight lives lost in a flood.

C. 1952: Many homes damaged in a regional flood.

D. 1962: Two flooding events involving 400 damaged homes, 120 damaged or destroyed mobile homes, and the temporary evacuation of 1,500 people from the urban floodplain.

(Please see the following website):

[http://www.crh.noaa.gov/unr/iwe/1972/Other Black Hills Floods/index.htm](http://www.crh.noaa.gov/unr/iwe/1972/Other_Black_Hills_Floods/index.htm)

Floods will certainly happen again in Rapid City where the 1972 victims and survivors had lived. Could the city somehow stop this cycle of flooding and prevent the loss of life and property. The answer to these questions did not come easily, and they did not come soon. Again, the wisdom of Robert Rosenheim came into the recovery equation. Bob had been chairman of the City of Denver's Urban Renewal Authority for many years and understood the federal cookbook for all forms of the complex federal housing programs. As part of these formulas, if HUD provided funds to buy land or older homes at market price and then create new housing projects on that land, the original owners were paid, by law, for the market value of the old or substandard home. The federal government also paid the original homeowners a relocation payment as an incentive to willingly sell their land and move or relocate their families to enable HUD to build new and better homes on the land. These relocation payments were significant.

Then, a few days after the Rapid City flood, in a historical coincidence, areas of Wilkes-Barre in eastern Pennsylvania were severely damaged by Hurricane Angus. It was a monster hurricane that caused more damage in Pennsylvania than the states in the South. The congressman from that area of PA was (coincidentally) Mr. Dan Flood. The congressman and his staff demanded the federal government provide 30-year term, 1% mortgages for the Pennsylvania flood victims. The loans would enable the disaster victims in his district to use low interest federal loans for replacement housing. The Small Business Administration had staff to manage the application process and was the logical agency to get the job done.

The Congressman from western South Dakota, Mr. Jim Abourezk (a courageous statesman and effective public servant who went on to great service in the United States Senate), and

his staff had worked in full cooperation with local governments, Governor Kneip and his staff, and the federal agencies since the early hours of the disaster. Jim immediately demanded to his friend, Congressman Wright Patman from Texas, the Chairman of the House Banking Committee, that the legislation to create the special Small Business Administration or SBA loans also include the requirement to make the same loans available to victims of the South Dakota Disaster. It was a brilliant legislative maneuver.

I cannot remember all of the details, but within a few hours Mr. Rosenhiem called me and the city council and our senior department heads to a conference call. He had some sound ideas and said something like this, "If the SBA will provide your victims with 30-year term, 1% loans, maybe *(with no promises) HUD (where he was the regional administrator and could call the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Former Governor George Romney of Michigan, or even call President Nixon if necessary for help) could provide a Housing and Urban Development grant in federal funds to permit the city government in Rapid City to buy the damaged homes and the lands in the urban floodplain from the flood victims. HUD could, maybe, provide the money to buy the lands and also provide relocation payments to the families, and the city could clear and own the lands."

Somebody said, "And the victims can build and own new homes in areas that are not flood prone and will be safe for this and future generations to use and enjoy."

Somebody suggested the city could buy the lands and create a long recreational avenue along both sides of Rapid Creek from Canyon Lake to the Pennington County Fairgrounds, and the lands would never be used for housing again."

Somebody said, "And we'll buy the businesses that are now dangerously close to Rapid Creek and relocate them to safe areas too."

I'm only sure of one thing. The best ideas did not come from me, but I was writing down all of the ideas. It was brightest moment of the recovery since the rains fell on that terrible Friday night. Over the next few weeks, the plan evolved. The city council held meeting in every neighborhood in the city to benefit from public involvement in the eventual plan. The plan got better and better as the concept evolved and the council listened to the wisdom of the people. It was democracy at its best. Rapid City was eventually included in the 1972 Federal Disaster Recovery Act, and the SBA provided hundreds of loans to help our victims (including a special program for folks who had been living in rental housing that was destroyed in the flood). The victims also enjoyed the benefits of the recovery plan.

By August, the City Council finished the long and complex federal application for funding from HUD. It called for a \$60 Million federal grant to enable the City to buy the lands in the flood plain. The city had surveyed the lands during June and July, and could now define the floodplain for the 100-year flood and a potential 500-year flood. Mr. Rosenheim marshaled his forces and personally carried the application to Washington. In September, Vice President Agnew came to Rapid City and announced the approval of a \$48 Million grant for disaster recovery. Secretary Romney brought the contact to Rapid City in late October, and the council authorized me to sign and accept it.

The Arithmetic: This is important for future generations to understand. The final terms of the SBA loans included these facts:

- A. Through a complex appraisal process the city purchased the vacant lot and the damaged homes (or the concrete foundations) at a post-flood value. This money was used by the victim to partially pay down their original mortgage.
- B. The new loan included funds to pay off the balance of the flood victim's original mortgage on their demolished or damaged home.
- C. The SBA loans included the cost of the victim's new home.
- D. The HUD grant also provided a relocation payment for each family to help the victims get on their feet in their new home.
- E. Do the math. The new payment (calculated at a rate of 1% over a 30-year term) was close to what the original mortgage payment (at 6-7% interest, over a 20-year term loan) had been before the flood. Property taxes were probably a little more on the more expensive and new homes.
- F. Better yet, the victims (35 years after the flood) now own their home in a safe location and enjoy and benefit from the real estate appreciation.
- G. The saving and loan associations and banks in RC that had loaned the money on the original mortgages were paid back. None the S and L's failed due to loans that were unwisely made to the homeowners on floodplain lands before the flood. The program was a bail-out for the banks and savings and loan association. Their customers would have never been able to pay off those loans without the federal assistance. Everyone in SD should remember this when we start to damn and condemn the federal government. The federal taxpayers were very generous to the victims of the 1972 disaster.
- H. The total federal expenditure in the Four County Disaster Area during the first five years of the 1970s was approximately \$170 Million. In 2002 dollars the cost would be approximately \$650 Million (by a 2002 estimate by the USGS). See the website above with the history of previous floods.

Question Number Four: What positive changes resulted in Rapid City because of the flooding in 1972?

In general, the HUD program answered both challenges that the City Council faced in the early summer of 1972.

1. Low interest loans helped the victims, over the long term, acquire and own replacement housing in safe locations.
2. Nobody was (or is) permitted to live in the floodplain.
3. The land was immediately zoned as park land. It now requires a vote of the people to sell even one square foot of the floodplain for commercial and residential use.
4. Future and current generations in Rapid City now enjoy dozens of recreational features on the expanded floodplain park system including a hiking and biking trail system, soccer fields, and ball fields. The city owns and maintains several square miles of park land that is close to every neighborhood in the city. Thousands of citizens and visitors visit the park. Nobody sleeps there. The Rapid City Chamber of Commerce defines the floodplain park as a city treasure and pledges to guard and protect the floodplain from sale and future violations for home and business locations.

5. Over 100 business owners sold their damaged structures and lands to the city and relocated to new and safe sites by using the 1%, 30-year term loans.
6. Future floods in varying magnitudes will again occur along the banks of Rapid Creek. Park and recreational lands will be damaged. However, the loss of life and personal property will be much less severe than in the 1972 flood.
7. The HUD program enabled the city to also acquire land for the new Rapid City Central High School, the Rushmore Plaza Civic Center, and several properties in downtown Rapid City where private investors purchased the cleared lands from the Urban Renewal Agency and built new offices and businesses in the central business district to strengthen the city's tax base and provide employment in the downtown area.
8. Public safety personnel will not be forced to risk life and limb for as many future rescue procedures during Rapid City's next big flood.
9. Perimeter land values near the beautiful lineal park have increased in value due to the proximity of the park to these lands.
10. Rapid City has not had to ask the federal government for disaster recovery funds from any natural disaster since the aftermath of the 1972 flood. In short, the comprehensive program will save the federal and local taxpayers money over the short-term and long-term.

Conclusion:

These lessons in urban floodplain management came at a horrendous price. None of us who went through the grief and strain will ever be the same. This recovery did not happen on a massive and instant scale. It happened as civil servants employed by the City Council met with one family at a time and explained the complex procedures. Most of the victims were cooperative, and less than 10% of the families/victims forced the city to use eminent domain procedures to set the price for purchase of the lands.

Nevertheless, it is not pleasant to force hundreds of folks (about 1,100 families) out of their long established homes. The transitions for the elderly survivors of the flood were particularly painful and filled with stress. One lady who lived 40 yards behind the Baken Park Shopping Center on the west side of Rapid Creek cried to our staff and begged to stay in her home. She said, "This little house is all I have left. If you let me live here, I'll donate my home to the city after I pass away." Mr. Swanson and his staff were also in tears. The city purchased her home, and she moved away from Rapid City. It was a heavy price to pay for safety in the urban floodplain.

Now, 35 years later, many challenges remain for the city and its taxpayers. Several years ago, the people voted overwhelmingly to stop and prohibit the sale of 10 acres of floodplain land in the most narrow part of the floodplain (the Gap, just below M-Hill). The margin was not close. The people of Rapid City cherish and will preserve their park system.

Now, in 2007, a short-sighted developer is again eyeing land that is close to the creek and using a technicality to rationalize the development of over 30 apartments very close to the creek. That long-established Rapid City family should not leave a legacy with a major and significant violation of these terribly low lands for residential use near the creek. It would be a crime to expose 30 families to the eternal dangers from future floods on Rapid Creek above Canyon Lake. If this project is built, national guardsmen, city firemen and policemen, and

public works employees will have to risk their life to rescue the folks who will be living so near to the creek during future floods. All of the floodplain should remain a recreational avenue from the west end of the city to the east end.

During my short four years of service as mayor, the city was fortunate to have two fine professors from the South Dakota School of Mines serve on the City Council. One economist, Mr. Earl Hausle, was also a fine historian. His hobby was Indian lore in Paha Sapa or the Black Hills. After the flood, he traveled to the Pine Ridge Reservation to discuss Indian lore and history with several tribal elders and prepared an oral or historical (recorded) report of his discussions. He asked the leaders about the Rapid City flood. One gentleman said, "The Indian tribes never camped or lived near the creeks that flow out of the east side of Paha Sapa."

Earl asked, "Why not?"

The man said, "Too many bears! Too many floods."

I wish the students in Waubay much success with your history project and sincerely hope these comments will help you complete your research. Congratulations on your scholarship.

Please don't forget to read that book by Mr. McCullough. Have a nice summer.

Thank you.

Don Barnett
Mayor of Rapid City, 1971-1975