

NOTIFYING RESIDENTS OF THE PMF WISE PRACTICE OR POLITICAL SUICIDE?

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ABSTRACT

In October 2002, some 7,000 residents of the Georges River floodplain in Sydney received a letter notifying them that they may be inundated in an extreme flood event such as the probable maximum flood (PMF). Most of the recipients of these letters would previously have been unaware of their potential flood risk. The notification letters provided opportunities for residents to find out further information through workshops, the Internet or by telephone contact with their local council. An SES 'FloodSafe' brochure and information about improving flood readiness was also provided in the mail-out.

An additional 6,000 residents along Prospect Creek, a major tributary of the Georges River, also received similar notification letters. In total about 13,000 residents received personally addressed information explaining their risk of flooding in the PMF.

The Georges River notification letters and the associated community consultation strategy have been prepared by the Georges River Floodplain Management Committee as part of the *Georges River Floodplain Risk Management Study and Plan*, one of the largest management studies undertaken in NSW. The Committee comprises representatives from Bankstown, Fairfield, Liverpool and Sutherland Councils, as well as the SES, various government agencies and community representatives. For Prospect Creek, the letters and consultation strategy were developed by Fairfield Council and timed to coincide with the release of information along the Georges River.

This paper concentrates on the Georges River activities and discusses the reasons why its Committee chose to embark on this community consultation strategy. It also describes the community reaction and political ramifications. Given that this is one of the first occasions when such a significant group of floodplain residents have been directly notified of their full flood risk, the experiences gained by the Committee and the lessons learnt may be of particular relevance to other NSW councils considering a similar type of notification.

Notifying Residents of the PMF – Wise Practice or Political Suicide?

1. INTRODUCTION

Public awareness and consultation activities are important outcomes of any floodplain management study. Two common questions often arise:

- < What is the best way of informing people about their flood risk; and
- < How widely should we consult?

Many in the community genuinely want to know what the flood risk is on their property. They want to know how high floodwater can reach, and what action they can take to reduce their losses. This information empowers them to make an informed decision about where they live and the type of housing. However, many other residents don't want to know – either because they don't believe that their home could flood, or more likely because of the potential impact on the value of their property.

These conflicting attitudes make the decision on how to notify residents of their flood risk, and who to notify, a difficult one for a council. The council will either stand accused of not notifying residents of a flood risk that was known all along, or risk being consumed in a political backlash from members of the community who just don't want to know about the flood risk on their property, or don't want others to know.

This issue has been carefully considered as part of a floodplain management study being undertaken on the Georges River for Liverpool, Fairfield, Bankstown and Sutherland Councils. Deriving an appropriate consultation strategy was a significant challenge for the study's consultants, Bewsher Consulting, and the four participating councils. Memories were still vivid of the political backlash that occurred in the early 1980's following flooding investigations and the preparation of preliminary flood maps for the Georges River. The protest was so significant that it led to the cessation of the State Government's floodplain mapping program and also a complete revision of the State Government's floodprone land policy in 1984.

With this challenge in mind, a consultation strategy was carefully developed. A component of the strategy was to send an individually addressed letter to 7,000 residents with property located on the floodplain (ie up to the PMF) advising of the risk of flooding. By itself, this would have resulted in political suicide. But in combination with other measures, the result has been much more positive.

Coincident with the Georges River strategy, Fairfield Council developed a consultation strategy along Prospect Creek, which is a major tributary of the Georges River. There were seen to be a number of advantages in coordinating the consultation activities of both the Georges River and Prospect Creek. As other technical papers have been prepared to address the specifics of the Prospect Creek activities, the remainder of this paper has concentrated on the development and implementation of the consultation strategy along the Georges River.

2. NOTIFYING THE COMMUNITY OF THE FLOOD RISK

There are various ways in which to communicate the risk of flooding with the community. The preparation of a floodplain management study is, in itself, an excellent means of raising community awareness of flooding. Other community awareness programs may be an outcome of a previous study, or other initiative of a council.

Some of the different means of notifying people of the flood risk include:

- < Notations on Section 149 Certificates;
- < Issue of flood certificates on a regular basis to residents of flood affected property;
- < Information packs delivered to residents;
- < Flood brochures or other pamphlets;
- < Delineating different flood risk areas on a map of the LGA;
- < Commemoration of significant historical floods (eg the 1955 flood at Maitland);
- < Community education programs;
- < Advertisements in the local paper; and
- < Workshops or other public meetings.

The most common form of notifying residents of the flood risk is through the issue of Section 149 Certificates. Whilst Section 149(2) and 149(5) certificates have an important role under the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act, with the former being attached to all contracts for sale of land in NSW, both certificates are an ineffective community education tool in themselves. They can, however, form an important component of an overall program to raise the community's awareness of flood risks.

The authors have previously written a number of papers relating to flood notations on Section 149 certificates and other flood awareness initiatives. A number of papers on this issue are included in our web site at www.bewsher.com.au.

It is fair to say that in NSW, the full extent of the flood risk is not generally appreciated by the floodplain community, with the flood risk information either kept hidden from them, or at best only released when diligent enquires are made by the individual owners or prospective purchasers. In this regard the authors are well known for their views that both state and local government should be more pro-active in releasing flood risk information to the affected community.

3. WHO SHOULD BE NOTIFIED OF THE FLOOD RISK?

When choosing to notify the community of the flood risk, a decision needs to be made on how widely that information is to be communicated. This can be targeted at:

- < all properties below a particular flood standard (typically the 100 year flood);
- < all properties within the floodplain (up to the PMF);
- < all properties within the LGA (regardless of whether or not there is a flood risk).

Further a decision has to be made whether to pro-actively inform the community, or only reactively when individual enquires are made.

Historically, nearly all councils have opted for reactive notifications. Usually only those residents with property below the 100 year flood receive such notifications, and then only when they apply for a Section 149 Certificates. A shortcoming of this approach is that owners of property located just above the 100 year flood will receive no advice, and could mistakenly interpret this to imply that there is no flood risk on their property. The new Floodplain Management Manual discusses this problem further, and recommends that such

notation, and other flood awareness initiatives, be extended to include all property that could potentially flood (ie up to the PMF).

Other councils provide blanket notations to everyone within the LGA, advising that the council has a flood policy that could restrict certain development. As everyone within the LGA receives the same advice, this system does nothing to communicate the real flood risk of an area. It is the authors' view that information on flooding should be provided to all residents on the floodplain (up to the PMF). Further, this advice should provide some indication of the risk of flooding – be it high, medium, or low, or other classification.

4. THE GEORGES RIVER EXAMPLE

4.1 The Flood Problem

The Georges River is located in and to the southwest of Sydney. It has a catchment area of approximately 960km². The River commences near Appin, about 60km southwest of Sydney. From here the river flows north towards Liverpool, through the Chipping Norton Lakes Scheme, and then east through Bankstown to Botany Bay. The river also contains a number of important tributaries, including Cabramatta Creek, Prospect Creek, Salt Pan Creek and the Woronora River.

Close to 1 million people live within the catchment, making it one of the most populated catchments in Australia. The catchment also contains significant areas identified for future urban development under the Sydney Region Urban Development Program.

Like all major river systems, the Georges River has its fair share of flooding problems. Whilst there have been no widespread floods along the River since 1988, the potential flood problem in this valley ranks amongst the most significant in the State, possibly second only to that of the Hawkesbury-Nepean Valley. The current floodplain management study has estimated that over 2,400 residential and commercial property along the banks of the Georges River would be inundated in the 100 year flood, with over 7,000 inundated in the PMF.

Many residents remember the 1986 and 1988 floods that occurred on the Georges River. These floods were estimated to be similar to a 20 year flood. However, much larger floods have occurred in the past, with one flood recorded in the late 19th century estimated to be substantially higher than the 100 year flood level. Unfortunately public awareness of these flood events is poor.

4.2 Previous Community Response to Flooding Issues

The Georges River was the centre of much debate and community reaction in the early 1980's, following attempts by the State Government to apply the 1977 Flood Prone Land Policy and in particular, the preparation of preliminary floodplain maps for the River.

The community expressed widespread concern and objection shortly after the release of the floodplain maps. Numerous articles appeared in the Sydney and local papers criticising the flood policy, objecting to the definition of floodprone land as land below the 100 year flood, and disputing the accuracy of the floodplain maps. The major concerns were that:

- < Property values would be reduced;
- < Banks would not lend money for the purchase of such properties; and
- < Insurance would not be available.

One of the TV networks also ran a campaign during its nightly news broadcast, with a headline something like... "Government wipes thousands of dollars off the value of homes in Western Sydney – and your home could be next."

The unrest culminated in a protest by residents outside Parliament House. The pressure from the community was so great that the State Government abandoned its flood mapping program and introduced a new flood prone land policy, which effectively handed back most development decisions on flood prone land to local councils.

4.3 The Current Consultation Program

An effective consultation strategy is always an essential component of floodplain management studies, the Georges River being no exception. Given some of the problems encountered in the early 1980's, the strategy was debated and refined by the Floodplain Management Committee. This occurred over about five committee meetings, each lasting some four hours and attended by upwards of twenty people representing the four Councils, the local community and various agencies including the State Emergency Service (SES) and the Department of Land and Water Conservation (DLWC).

After much debate and discussion, the Committee decided it had an obligation to pro-actively inform the community of the flood risk up to the PMF and to recommend to each council that it review its development controls to ensure they were compatible with the floodplain. The Committee saw significant advantages in seeking to provide as much consistency as possible across the councils in their system of flood risk classifications and development controls. It was further decided that there were definite advantages in notifying residents about the study and the flood risk as a collective group (ie the Committee), rather than from individual councils. Special project stationery was designed for correspondence, under the banner of the "Georges River Floodplain Management Committee" and carrying the logos of each of the four councils and that of the SES.

The strategy was to send individually addressed letters to all property owners within the PMF area notifying them of the study and advising that their property could be affected by flooding at some time in the future. Also included with the letter was an SES 'FloodSafe' brochure for the Georges River and a brief questionnaire. This notification was followed up with a series of public workshops to discuss the study and other issues related to flooding.

Further details of the strategy are outlined below.

4.3.1 Study Web Site

Information about the study was posted on the project web site. The site included information about the study, past flood events, and the floodplain management measures that the study would be considering. A questionnaire and newsletter were also included on the web site. Reports prepared during the study were also available for downloading from the site.

The site can be visited at www.bewsher.com.au/georges.htm.

4.3.2 Advertisements

A media release was issued by each council to the various local newspapers. This provided residents with information about the study, where to obtain further information, and about a number of workshops that were to be held in the near future.

4.3.3 SES 'FloodSafe' Brochure

In cooperation with the SES, a 'FloodSafe' brochure was prepared for the Georges River. The brochure alerted people to the flood risk, provided photos of some previous floods, included a map showing the extent of flooding in a PMF, and provided details of what to do in a flood.

The brochure was seen as a critical part of the consultation strategy. It carried the logos of the SES and each of the four councils participating in the study. This was to show that various authorities were working together to address the flood risk and that ultimately the study was about helping people during floods. The brochure was also seen as a 'gentle' means of introducing a map showing the extent of the PMF to the public.

4.3.4 Notification Pack Distributed to Residents

In October 2002, every property owner in the Georges River study area (up to the PMF) received an information pack about the study and was advised that their property could be potentially affected by flooding. Some 7,000 residents received:

- < an individually addressed, one page letter. This letter was carefully worded and reworded by the consultants and the committee, and then individually vetted by each council;
- < an SES FloodSafe brochure;
- < a short, one page questionnaire.

The letter also provided details of about a dozen public workshops to be held in November/December 2002, where residents could have input to the study. Each workshop targetted specific localities of the floodplain and was hosted by the relevant council. The location and venue of each workshop was initially withheld to prevent 'stacking' by interest groups.

A simple questionnaire was also distributed in the pack. This asked whether residents would like to be included on a mailing list for future advice; whether they would like to be sent a more detailed questionnaire; and whether they would like to participate in a public workshop. Residents were also asked whether there were any issues that the study should address.

4.3.5 Detailed Questionnaire

A more detailed Questionnaire was prepared and forwarded to all residents that requested a copy. It was also posted on the study web site, where it could be downloaded and completed. The questionnaire sought more information on people's flood experience, their attitudes to development controls, and their views on a range of possible floodplain management measures.

Some 475 residents requested a detailed questionnaire. Of these, 205 were completed and returned (a response rate of 43%).

4.3.6 Public Workshops

A series of public workshops followed the notification letters that were issued to residents. A decision was made to limit the size of workshop participants to about 30 people, to ensure that the workshops were both manageable and controllable. In all, 10 workshops were necessary (four in Bankstown, three in Fairfield, two in Liverpool and one in Sutherland).

A panel of speakers addressed each workshop, including representatives from the relevant Council, the SES, DLWC and the consultant. The Council representative welcomed participants and gave an overview of the study and the purpose of the workshop. The SES outlined their role in flood emergencies, and the importance of the information that they would be obtaining through the Floodplain Management Study. A representative from DLWC then talked about their role in the floodplain management process. Following a period for questions, the consultant presented further details of the study. This included results of computer modelling, different flood risk areas that had been defined (including a 'low flood risk' area between the 100 year flood and the PMF), and the likely planning controls that would apply to the different flood risk areas. Maps showing the different flood risk areas were also exhibited at the workshop.

An independent facilitator, Michael Whelan, assisted the preparation and conduct of the Fairfield and Bankstown workshops.

A series of 'frequently asked questions' (FAQs) were prepared and made available to all participants on arrival at the workshops. These listed (and answered) the range of questions that could be anticipated, such as:

- < "What does it mean if my property is in a low flood risk area?"
- < "Will my property value be affected?"
- < "Will I be able to get flood insurance?" etc

The FAQs ensured there was a considered response to these important questions; diffused many of the participant's concerns; and helped prevent the workshops from becoming 'bogged down' with these issues. A copy of the FAQs similar to that used during the workshops is available at www.bewsher.com.au/faqs-v2.htm.

4.4 Results of the Consultation Process

Given that some 7,000 properties received notifications in the Georges River and a similar number along Prospect Creek, it was anticipated that each Council would receive a large volume of phone enquiries following the notification. Whilst one council did receive up to a 100 phone calls, the other councils reported much fewer enquiries. Some of the phone enquiries were owners who disputed that their property was liable to flooding, either because they had never seen flooding on their property or that the property was above the council's 100 year flood level. Others were concerned over property values and insurance issues.

Within the Georges River, a total of 680 people returned the short questionnaire. Of these:

- < 634 (93%) wanted to be included in a mailing list for further information;
- < 475 (70%) requested a more detailed questionnaire (205 subsequently returned these);
- < 255 (38%) wanted to participate in a workshop; and
- < 192 (28%) had issues or other comments to make about the study.

The most frequent issues raised were:

- < concern over the impact of recent development on flood behaviour (34 responses);
- < request for additional flood information (17 responses);
- < concern over stormwater issues (17 responses);
- < support for improved emergency management measures (16 responses).

Only 10 people expressed concern on the impact of the study and the flood risk areas on property values or the availability of flood insurance. Five other people questioned the accuracy of the information that was presented.

The 10 workshops were reasonably well received by the community. There were some questions and debate on the “low flood risk “ area above the 100 year flood, and impacts on development potential, property values and availability of insurance. These questions had been expected and the answers that were provided at the workshops were relatively well received. The most heated debates largely centred on other local issues, which were largely unrelated to the study and the flood notifications.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Many councils are hesitant to notify residents of their flood risk – fearing the political ramifications that could occur. Nowhere are these fears more justified than on the banks of the Georges River, where political protests in the early 1980’s were largely responsible for the cessation of the State Government’s floodplain mapping program and a complete review of their Flood Prone Land Policy.

It was therefore with some trepidation that the four councils of the Georges River Floodplain Management Committee embarked on a consultation strategy to pro-actively notify all residents up to the PMF about the flood risk and a floodplain management study being undertaken to address these risks. Also significant was the number of properties above the 100 year flood (4,600 in all) that previously would have received no flood advice, even if they had made enquires of their council.

The Committee has been very pleased with the outcome of the consultation activities. The backlash that some Committee members were expecting did not eventuate. The success of the program probably stems from a number of reasons, including:

- < the notification process was just one part of a package of consultative measures;
- < the project was being undertaken by a group of authorities (rather than a single council);
- < the SES and DLWC played a large part in the process;
- < the workshops were carefully planned and managed, including the preparation of ‘frequently asked questions’ that addressed many of the concerns of those attending the workshops;
- < residents were being genuinely consulted;
- < the terminology used to describe that part of the floodplain above the 100 year flood (ie ‘low flood risk’ area) helped to keep the real flood risk of the area in context;
- < ensuring that residents within the ‘low flood risk’ area were aware that there would be very few, if any, development controls relating to flooding imposed on their property; and
- < that a floodplain management study was being undertaken to look at measures for reducing flood problems.

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Over the last two decades, Bewsher Consulting has completed a large number of NSW floodplain management studies funded under Local, State and Federal Government funding. The firm has developed various innovative approaches to floodplain management, particularly in the field of landuse planning and risk management assessment. Drew, together with other floodplain management consultants in the firm, has authored a number of papers on floodplain management and other related topics. Some of these can be found by visiting the company's web site at www.bewsher.com.au or by contacting the company directly in Sydney (ph. 02 9868 1966).

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Prior to joining Bewsher Consulting in 1998, John spent 12 years with the Department of Land and Water Conservation (and formerly the Public Works Department), where he was a Supervising Engineer in the Department's Floodplain Management Program. John was the Department's representative for flooding on the Georges River for much of this time. Since leaving the Department, John has undertaken a number of major floodplain management studies, including responsibility for the current Georges River Floodplain Management Study.



John has also worked for a number of other floodplain management consultants in Australia and the United Kingdom.