

The Berkshire Eagle

Flood strategies to reflect new reality

Letter to the Editor

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Recently the Berkshire Environmental Action Team (BEAT) investigated why Massachusetts' 100-year floodplain maps have not been updated to reflect the flooding from the more intense storms we are now getting. What we discovered was shocking! BEAT contacted the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), whom we were told usually does these updates. USGS said that Massachusetts has not updated the calculations used to determine our 100-year flood event in 35 years.

Massachusetts and Rhode Island are the only two states that have not yet updated their floodplain maps. Massachusetts is the only state that hasn't even started the process. BEAT contacted the state secretaries of transportation and environment and locally the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC). BRPC immediately recognized the issue as extremely important and is aggressively taking the case forward.

So, why is this issue so important? For one thing, when a new superstore is built along with its huge parking lot, all the rain that falls on the building and parking lot needs to be slowed down, spread out, and soaked into the ground so the rain recharges our ground water, rather than rushing to the river and increasing the likelihood of flooding. The engineers are supposed to design the system so that no more stormwater runs off the site after the site is developed than ran off before. But right now the engineers are designing as if our storms were the same as they

were more than 35 years ago. We are getting much more intense storms, and we are getting them more frequently. The additional stormwater runs off into our rivers, not only carrying pollution with it, but also creating a pulse of water that travels downstream. This pulse contributes to flooding. Larger storms and more pavement -- larger floods.

This is not just an environmental issue. It is a health and safety issue. These larger pulses of stormwater during a large, intense storm can cause tremendous damage, washing out bridges and roads. This is why the Department of Transportation is usually the agency that pays to have these calculations revised periodically. Consider what happened during tropical storm Irene. Now consider that we are still designing our bridges and roads as if we still experience the rainfall of 35 years ago.

There is no getting around the fact that we are getting more rain in a shorter amount of time. We do need to redraw our 100-year floodplain maps to reflect this fact, but we also need to design for tomorrow's storms or our flood maps will be out-of-date as soon as we draw them.

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The writer is executive director, Berkshire Environmental Action Team. Two related websites that may be of interest: Massachusetts Climate Change Adaptation Report <http://www.mass.gov/eea/air-water-climate-change/climate-change/climate-change-adaptation-report.html> Extreme Precipitation in New York and New England website <http://precip.eas.cornell.edu/>

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