



Invitation to Action:
The Proposal to Relocate Flood Plain
Properties at Soldiers Grove, Wisconsin

A Summary and Update - August, 1978

"INVITATION TO ACTION"

The Proposal to Relocation Flood Plain Properties
at Soldiers Grove, Wisconsin

Summary & Update - December 1978

· COMMUNITY REVITALIZATION PROJECT

Village of Soldiers Grove

Soldiers Grove, Wisconsin 54655

INVITATION TO ACTION: The Proposal to Relocation Flood Plain Properties At
Soldiers Grove, Wisconsin

ONE: Background and History

Soldiers Grove is an incorporated municipality, population 524, located some 90 miles due West of Madison, in the northeast corner of Crawford County. The town was settled in the early 1800's along the banks of the Kickapoo River which for many years formed an integral basis for the town's economy providing both transportation and power.

The southwest portion of the State was not covered by the last glacial advance and is referred to as the Driftless Area. Topography is uncharacteristic of the North Central Plains, being rugged in nature, with hills and valleys in small scale, elevations up to 350 feet from ridge top to valley.

Flooding in the watershed is "flashy" as a result. At Soldiers Grove three land masses constrict the River's flood plain, producing quick rises and high velocities under flood conditions.

In the 1880's a spur railroad line was built to serve the Kickapoo River Valley. Built along the relatively flat flood plain, it prolonged the association of town and River. The necessity for flood plain location ceased with the advent of rural electrification and the strengthening of road systems in the 1920's. But the sudden urbanization sapped the community's youth and ability to keep up with intermittent floods and flood plain regulations are "killing" the town. Based on local inspiration and common sense, a strategy for community revitalization is now being sought to finally break the traditional but increasingly destructive location of the town center in close association with the River.

The crisis nature of the community's situation, dramatized by the July 4th weekend floods, was the inevitable consequence of a long chain of events beginning well beyond the Valley. The federal government has spent billions of dollars in structural flood control works since the 1920's. During that time studies were made of structural works on the Kickapoo, culminating in a Corps of Engineers' Kickapoo River Valley Flood Control Project. Authorized by Congress in 1962, this consisted of both an earthen dam and impoundment that are 36 miles up stream at LaFarge, Wisconsin, and local protection works at Soldiers Grove and the next town downstream, Gays Mills. The dam construction began in the late 1960's but, caught by the increasing environmental awareness and disenchantment with structural works, it sputtered to a stop 75% complete, in 1975. Local protection works have languished at the mercy of adversary parties to the dam.

Meanwhile the Flood Insurance Program with its mandatory flood plain land use controls was promoted as the panacea of federal disaster spending. But the program fundamentally failed to recognize that it's effects on the development and use of existing flood plain property were as disastrous as any flood. Flood Plain Zoning legislated the evacuation of the flood plain but without any corresponding compensation.

Local people perceived the threat of the legal, natural and economic forces upon Soldiers Grove and set about trying to prevent death of their community. They resisted the imposition of the Flood Plain Zoning Ordinance and finally after nearly three years, passed it "under protest". They also took stock of the local benefits and costs of the Corps' levee plans and attempted to overcome the single-purpose nature of the levees by requesting a Section 73(b) substitution of a nonstructural alternative, claiming that the levees failed to address the fundamental socio-economic problem of the town's flood plain location. The levees would only turn a dying community prone to flooding into a dying community protected from flooding only by a wall of earth.

In a remarkable demonstration of participatory planning and raw guts, the people of Soldiers Grove are attempting to determine their community's destiny. Emphatically, their choice is Pro-Life, not to give up but to pick up and renew, to relocate!

* * * * *

TWO: The Specifics of the "Relocation Proposal".

Following its local suggestion in 1974, the Corps of Engineers formally investigated the relocation idea in their "Partnership Study" of alternatives to the then embroiled LaFarge Dam. Issued in February 1975, the Corps found relocation to be cost effective and recommended it as an option for local protection works at Soldiers Grove. The Corps failed to find a benefit/cost ratio greater than unity after the halting of construction work on the LaFarge Dam and also failed to respond to the Village's claims of structural bias in the methodology and in applicability of the Corps' findings.

In 1975, then, the Village began planning efforts independent of the Corps. Initially, planning assistance from the Mississippi River Regional Planning Commission allowed the Village to contract 3 professors from the University of Wisconsin-Madison to develop alternatives for Soldiers Grove. They concluded that the relocation alternative was the recommended one. The following year three studies were done:

one by Congress, and the other two by the Village. The Congressional Study was an attempt to have a third party (The URS Corp of NYC) "impartially" evaluate alternatives on the Kickapoo. The URS Study was an overview study, lacking accurate detail of specific situations. It was restricted to current B/C methodologies and failed to produce an acceptable ration of greater-than-unity for Soldiers Grove, though it spent pages discussing the inadequacies of that methodology (see especially Chapter XI, pp 12-13).

The Village's first study was jointly funded by the community and the State of Wisconsin's Community Development Fund (1977 Project #54). The methodology was again to hire professional multi-disciplinary consultants to conduct the work. The Laufenberg Research and Development team of Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, was selected and in December 1976, produced "A Relocation of Flood Plain Properties Implementation Program for the Village of Soldiers Grove, Wisconsin" which, in summary, confirmed the UW findings and detailed implementation strategies.

The Village's second study was jointly financed by the community and the State of Wisconsin's Office of State Planning (Technical Assistance Contract). The "Preliminary Review of Social and Environmental Impacts of Flood Damage Reduction Alternatives for Soldiers Grove, Wisconsin", was released in December 1976, written by Wendy Odegard, in consultation with Professor Eugene A. Wilkening, Chair of the Department of Rural Sociology, UW-Madison, and Tom Hirsch, Relocation Coordinator of the Village of Soldiers Grove. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources also furnished computer analysis and simulation of flood conditions for the review.

The recommendations made by the studies were consistent. They suggested treating only the flooded portions of the community and at no time included total town relocation. Because of the restricted availability of buildable land, and in the interests of keeping the relocated Main Street services close to the non-relocated residences, two relocation sites were identified.

Since the July floods, seeking expediency, simplicity and cost reductions, the community has recommended that all the relocation activities be at a single site, one of the two originally suggested. Owned by the Village, an already contracted for sewer and water project is making the site operational.

The relocation proposal would affect 92 structures which contain 44 business operations and 50 dwelling units. There are three businesses in the Village which are not in the flood plain. This means that 93% of the businesses are in substandard facilities. There are 208 total dwelling units in the Village which means that 24% are, ipso facto, substandard. (In fact a 1978 survey indicated that over 46% of

the Village's housing resources are substandard*.)

The proposal is, in reality, a combination of 4 types of flood damage reduction actions "blended" to meet the specific situation at Soldiers Grove; relocation is most often singled out for attention but altogether they are:

1. Evacuation/Relocation of the Floodway Properties
Acquisition with public funds for dedication to "open space" redevelopment.
2. Floodproofing-in-place of Flood Fringe Structures
Treatment of all fringe area residential structures to conserve the housing stock and render the units decent, safe, and sanitary. Some evacuation maybe indicated for individual units for health, safety, or economic considerations.
3. Continued Flood Plain Management
To allow appropriate development of the 1% flood plain and to maximize public enjoyment of the natural benefits unique to flood plains.
4. Continued Availability of Flood Insurance
To protect at private risk the monetary value of future flood plain property and crops.

Implementation of the relocation proposal has already begun. Using it's own funds, the Village purchased the relocation site known as the Farm Site in June 1977. This year with supplemental assistance from the Wisconsin DNR and Office of the Governor (using EDA "304" funds) the Village is extending water and sewer to the farm, and making basic water system improvements including the addition of a second well, one which is not in the flood plain, and increased storage capacity for updated fire protection. Some further site development costs have been identified but the basic task now sought for funding is the acquisition of the flood plain properties so that the property owners' equity maybe realized, enabling them in turn to finance the development costs of the new site, the balance of the project.

Based on costs identified in the Laufenberg Implementation Study (and now being updated) non-local funding of the private property acquisition and the statutory relocation benefits, and the replacement of municipal facilities would total about \$3.25

*"Substandard" was defined as needing major work on structural, electrical, plumbing, or heating systems.

million, about 60% of the total project costs. (Coincidentally, .60 is the disputed B/C ratio that the URS study produced, the break-even point for federal spending) A 40% local share is unheard of in most public works projects, and represents, along with the Village's efforts to date to implement the proposal, the community's seriousness and dedication to executing the project.

In conclusion, from the limited palate of four types of actions, a multiplicity of benefits are achieved: protection from the 1% flood, resolution of serious threats to public health and safety in housing and community facilities, community redevelopment and economic revitalization, effectiveness of government spending, wise energy management and environmental enhancement.

Summary of Arguments for "The Relocation Proposal"

*** Citizen participation-produced plans--local leadership in plan formulation and implementation are established facts. Substantial local community investment to continue.

*** Net effect of the revitalization components will develop Self-Reliance, a lessening of built-in dependence on Federal and State compensatory programs, through development of local economic opportunities.

*** Preservation of small rural towns to serve the family farm agriculture is good resource management. We believe the small towns play a vital role on the American scene, and, in spite of short term adversity, will continue to be needed.

*** 100% effective 1% chance flood protection--All habitable structures in the flood plain will be removed from flood threat and need of flood plain management.

*** Highly Transferable Procedures--Relocation is not the universal solution to flood plain management--but the particular situation at Soldiers Grove, with 98% business involvement, is worth of pursuit on demonstration grounds alone, we believe.

*** Environmentally beneficial--the unwise land use of intensive development in the flood plain will be eliminated and appropriate uses established. This will achieve the goals of flood plain management programs, sound community development and common sense. "Evacuating the flood plain and relocating on upland areas is an environmentally beneficial alternative for flood damage reduction that assures a relatively rare type of ecosystem would be maintained at the expense of a much more abundant one." (p. 33 P.E.R., Dec. '76

*** Soldiers Grove represents a unique opportunity for community-wide energy use management.

* * * * *

THREE: ISSUES

References have been made to both State and Federal flood plain management policies which are relevant and contributory to the current crisis situation at Soldiers Grove:

1. Executive Order #11988 - represents the President's commitment to wise resource management and specifically not to invest public monies in flood plain locations when practicable alternatives exist.

Soldiers Grove claims the viability of its Relocation Proposal and requests further Federal participation to complete implementing the alternative.

2. Water Resources Development Act of 1974, Flood Insurance Act of 1968 - establish the federal interest in pursuit of preventative, non-structural flood damage actions. In particular, the non-structural alternative was first on President Carter's list of issues in his recommendation against funding of the Kickapoo River Valley Flood Control Project on April 18, 1977. He went on to recommend "assisting (Kickapoo) communities in developing non-structural flood control".

Soldiers Grove claims that the benefits of the non-structural approach are of national demonstration value, being highly transferable to other locations in more or less direct form. Yet, it has never claimed to be the "universal solution" for flood damage reduction in the United States. Nor are we attempting to justify a national commitment to purchase the nation's flood plains. In some communities evacuation/relocation can be the answer to flooding and other community problems. At Soldiers Grove it makes the perfect fit of program and needs. Within the Kickapoo River Valley area there are seven urbanized communities, perhaps one other has potential for a sizeable relocation program. A few others could utilize the approach on a neighborhood or individual structure basis; in no case is relocation the "universal" answer nor is the Village dictating to its sister communities in the Valley.

3. 1936 Flood Control Act, the URS Report (Chapt. X, pp 12-13) - Responsible government participation is being requested. The community and its various consultants and state agencies all concur that the project is worthy of pursuit, that the benefits outweigh the costs. The Village claims that the basic test of benefits exceeding costs is met. Unfortunately "official" analysis fails to reflect the real world values and decision-making. Only quantifiable results are figured, and in particular the notion of Quality of Life is ignored.
4. Resource Management Policies - Not only is the availability of community-wide energy management rare but the opportunity to have an all-new downtown designed to conserve and efficiently use energy resources is unique. Furthermore, Soldiers Grove could demonstrate that resource conservation practices are economically stimulating and supportive of sound community development practices.
5. The Responsibility of State and Federal Standards Imposed On Local Communities "In the Public Interest" - For example, the Federal Flood Plain Management Program including the Flood Insurance Program, and the Wisconsin NRL-116 recognize the public benefits of limiting man's development of the Nation's flood plains but fail to be fiscally responsible for achieving that goal.

Soldiers Grove recognizes the substantial local benefits and has committed itself to a corresponding local participation. Dollar-wise approximately 40% or over \$2.25 million is projected to be local, a combination of private and local public investment.

* * * * *

FOUR: Mechanisms for Non-Local Participation

Since the July 1978 floods, a number of Federal and State programs have been identified which appear appropriate for funding the acquisition of the flood plain properties. Some, like the housing programs, address themselves more to the replacement aspect of the relocation proposal in contrast to the acquisition phase which is the Federal funding specifically sought by the Village. Some have no funds available this Fiscal Year. Virtually all the programs, to be brought on line in a timely fashion and with sufficient response to meet the community's needs, require a clear commitment from the Wisconsin Congressional Delegation, the Governor of Wisconsin, and the explicit support of the Administration. It appears that both the administrative requirements and

the political commitments must be made coincidentally or nearly so. That is, program administrators are looking to the legislators for guidance and simultaneously the the lawmakers must be assured that realistic delivery of commitments can be made.

Several examples of this type of progress have now been demonstrated. The HUD Secretary invited an application to her Discretionary Funds for Disaster Recovery and released \$900,000 for a variety of specific tasks centering around relocation, site preparation, and floodway property acquisition. Also, the Community Services Administration has provided \$40,000 to enable the Village to develop administrative capability and retain control over the program. Finally, after the Secretary of the Interior announced a \$272,000 reservation of Land & Water Conservation Fund Contingency Reserve to develop a park in the flood plain at Soldiers Grove, which is to be used for acquisition.

We, at the local level, do not presume to dictate the terms to either the State or Federal governments. We do, however, claim that there is ample justification and motivation for involvement by both. We also claim ample existing programs and funding sources exist without resorting to time-consuming congressional action. Most importantly, we claim that there is currently lacking a clear commitment of participation by our representatives in Madison and Washington to carry the Relocation Proposal all the way through.

The Village of Soldiers Grove has made substantial local efforts to plan and even begin implementation of the Relocation Proposal. Many of these efforts have been made in "good faith" on the understanding that a commitment has been made to assist local protection from flooding.

Now, with the flood devastation a daily reminder of unresolved issues and uncertain futures, the people of Soldiers Grove look to the people of Wisconsin and the United States to be responsible neighbors.

When there's a will, there'll be a way!