

NJ flooding: With extreme rain more common, the appeal of flood insurance expands

Asbury Park Press

During a freakishly potent storm two weeks ago, rainwater three inches deep rushed into retiree Robert Ferris's home in Brick's Greenbriar senior living community.

More than 200 homes in Brick were damaged, along with a couple dozen in Howell, by floodwaters that day. These kinds of storms are becoming more regular, experts say, meaning that homeowners would be well served to consider another layer of protection — flood insurance — on their largest asset.

Although the flooding at Ferris's home was relatively tame, first-responders rescued some of his neighbors using a fleet of boats in the worst round of flooding in Ocean County since superstorm Sandy nearly six years ago.

The homeowners in Greenbriar and nearby Sutton Village face the prospect of repairing thousands of dollars worth of damage out of their own pocket.

While homeowners policies usually pay out in the event that a pipe bursts and floods your kitchen, they do not typically cover water that falls from the sky

"You don't have flood insurance," Jay Nolan, who lives on Markham Street near Ferris, recalled his agent telling him. "That's it."

"You know, I talked to my insurance man about flood coverage), but I decided not to get it," Ferris, 87, told the Asbury Park Press last week.

And why would they get flood insurance? Their homes had never previously flooded and are in what FEMA, the federal agency that creates hazard maps to indicate levels of flood risk in an area, considers "Zone X" — a minimally threatened location that has less than a 1 in 500 chance of a damaging flood in any given year.

Perhaps those odds are getting stronger.

Nolan, who watched 2 feet of water seep into his Greenbriar home and swamp his Chevy Camaro, blames a new Garden State Parkway interchange for funneling the storm runoff into his neighborhood. Two state assemblymen have asked the state Department of Transportation to look into this theory.

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Ocean County Freeholder Jack Kelly said the interchange had nothing “or very little do” with the flooding at a recent meeting.

NJ FLOODING: No evidence new Parkway exit caused flood in Brick, freeholder says

A deeper existential menace looms larger than allegedly poor highway engineering.

The growing frequency of intense storms is one of the primary identified threats from climate change.

CLIMATE CHANGE: 5 signs it's already begun in NJ

Warmer air can hold more water vapor and the Earth is getting hotter, meaning that extreme rainfall events, such as a half foot of precipitation in a single morning, are more and more likely.

“Heavy downpours are increasing nationally, especially over the last three to five decades, with the largest increases in the Midwest and Northeast,” according to the 2014 National Climate Assessment, a federal report on the signs and effects of climate change in America.

Homeowners should be thinking about environmental transformations when considering how to insure their home, said Amy Bach, executive director of United Policyholders, a consumer advocate focused on the insurance industry.

“Climate change is causing flooding in areas that have never flooded before, and insurers have generally broadened their exclusionary language on homeowners insurance) related to water damage,” she told the Press. “If your neighborhood is not mapped as a flood risk zone, the price tag shouldn’t be too painful.”

FEMA declined to answer specific questions as the agency is focused on messaging related to Hurricane Lane’s path toward Hawaii.

Homeowners in areas outside the 500-year floodplain, like those in the Greenbriar and Sutton Village developments, are eligible for what FEMA calls “preferred risk” policies.

That loosely translates to “affordable” — \$344 per year for maximum building and contents coverage for a house on a slab. Lower levels of coverage can be bought for as little as \$100 annually.

“For under \$500 a year, it makes sense,” said Frank Valente, an Allstate insurance agent with offices in Manasquan and Toms River. “I’ve always owned it no matter where I lived.”

Valente said customer interest in flood coverage expanded after Sandy in October 2012, but has gradually waned as the memory of that disaster fades in the minds of those who weren’t directly impacted.

He said it’s his duty to remind people to expect the unexpected.

“I think most good agents and financial experts will say the same thing,” he said. “A flood) can ruin you. For most people, this is their biggest investment.”

When told of the price range for a flood policy, Ferris said he was interested. “Absolutely, yeah, I would have to consider it,” he said.