

1,750 Baton Rouge homeowners flooded in 2016 will be told to elevate, demolish or take other steps

https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/article_8b1a508e-e594-11eb-b9c3-bbc4ba64e81d.html

BY DAVID J. MITCHELL | Staff writer

Updated Jul 15, 2021 at 2:12 pm

In April, Livingston Parish homeowners were sent similar letters from FEMA requesting that residents protect their homes against a future flood, primarily through elevation or buyouts. On Thursday, Sharon Weston Broomes said they are starting to tell 1,750 East Baton Rouge parish households that were inundated in August 2016 that they may need to do the same or take other significant actions to protect against future flooding.

East Baton Rouge Parish is starting to tell 1,750 households that were inundated in August 2016 that they may **need to elevate their homes, sell them to the government to be demolished or take other significant actions to protect against future flooding.**

On Thursday, Mayor-President Sharon Weston Broome's administration said a letter giving residents that news will be mailed in batches of 300, starting Friday.

City-parish officials wouldn't say which homeowners are affected because FEMA considers that private information. But they described general areas where affected homes are located, including in the Hurricane Creek watershed and along Jones and Ward Creek.

The letters are required because the prior city-parish administration didn't fully follow Federal Emergency Management Agency rules after the flood nearly five years ago. Homes that should have been elevated, demolished or had other mitigation measures because of their level of damage didn't have the work done.

In 2019, **Federal Emergency Management Agency audits found East Baton Rouge and Livingston parishes did not properly assess damage or issue permits after the floods to homes that were "substantially damaged."**

At the time, the **audits threatened to limit future federal aid if the failures weren't rectified. Baton Rouge officials now say homeowners parish-wide could lose their 15% discount on flood insurance if the parish doesn't send the letters and take other steps to bring the jurisdiction into compliance.**

The rules for the U.S. taxpayer-subsidized National Flood Insurance Program, established decades ago, **require local governments to enforce floodplain rules that help reduce flood risk and the costs to the federal program.**

City-parish officials said they are trying to manage the flow of calls about the letters, while also continuing to try getting some homes off the list. After the first batch of letters go out, additional batches will be mailed every six to eight weeks until the end of the year.

Homeowners who get the letters will also have an option to appeal the finding, city-parish officials said.

What happens if homeowners ignore the letters remains unclear. The Advocate was unable to get that information from FEMA by press time. And city-parish officials said they don't know what the consequences would be and refuse to speculate — but that they would do what they can to help property owners comply.

Of the total 1,750 homes being targeted for the compliance efforts, about 300 are vacant, city-parish officials said.

Broome's administration has known which households were affected for some time — staff were preparing to send the letters in late April. But Broome abruptly halted the process after Livingston officials sent out similar letters and faced an outcry from shocked homeowners.

Many either had long since rebuilt or had recently bought restored homes from the original owners, unaware the requirement to elevate or sell loomed over them.

[FEMA: 1,800+ East Baton Rouge Parish homes may need to be raised or sold because of 2016 floods](#)

Broome said in April that she wanted to wait until her administration could develop a plan that would give these homeowners a path forward and try to avoid creating any additional anxiety over the already traumatic '16 flood, something she personally experienced at her own home.

"So, I understand the emotion that is attached when someone may say, 'You need to do this, this, this or you didn't do A, B, C correctly,'" she said Thursday.

Since then, she said the city-parish and FEMA have had a collaborative discussion about how to proceed. The parish has also created a website; hired a firm, Quality Engineering and Surveying, to handle individual cases; and taken other steps that parish officials say will help residents begin the process.

FEMA grants can help homeowners pay 75% to 90% of the cost of elevating homes. Baton Rouge leaders said they were still working to find additional

funding to fill some or all of the 10% to 25% match homeowners might need with a FEMA grant.

Broome said she and her staff were making the advance announcement Thursday about the letters to let people know what is coming in the mail.

"We wanted our people to understand the path forward. We just didn't want them to get the letters cold and not understand the path forward," Broome said.

FEMA deems a home "substantially damaged" if it is located in the most high-risk flood zones, is at an elevation below the projected height of a 100-year flood and had flood damage that would cost 50% or more of the pre-flood value, excluding land.

Most high-risk flood zones are "A" or "AE" and require flood insurance for homes with mortgages.

Typically, homes don't hit the necessary level of flood damage to be considered substantially damaged until they had at least four feet of water, city-parish officials added. But that rough benchmark can vary, especially for multi-story houses.

Rachael Lambert, city-parish development director, said the batches of letters are being tiered so the first groups are for those households that have better chances of succeeding in appealing. Lambert said those homes were picked first because the appeal process can be lengthy.

City-parish officials are also continuing to work with FEMA on having the agency recognize the impact of around \$750 million in flood protection improvements in the pipeline for Baton Rouge, work that could lower the projected height of future floods and, indirectly, knock more homes off the list of 1,750.

Some of those homes are in latter batches of letters. Any change would require an alteration to NFIP flood risk maps.

The city-parish has been working for more than two years to winnow an original FEMA estimate of more than 3,320 homes suspected of being out of compliance. Tallies from late last year put the refined number at just more than 1,800 but the final number was cut to 1,750, Lambert said.

Lambert and Broome said that notification process was delayed probably by about a year due to the coronavirus pandemic, which sent workers home for months and disrupted the normal flow of commerce and government across the region.

Livingston Parish officials said the pandemic caused a similar delay for them.

The problems triggering the notification effort occurred under the administration of former Mayor-President Kip Holden. Though the city-parish and FEMA sent out an army of inspectors to assess post-flood damage, the local government didn't notify people about their status until they pulled permits for renovations and repair.

Many apparently didn't get the permits, so they didn't find out. FEMA notes just this kind of risk in its guidance literature about the approach the city-parish used in 2016. FEMA says the approach the city-parish used then is a legal, but is less preferred.

Lambert and Robert Joyner, the city-parish floodplain manager, said the parish now uses FEMA's preferred approach, which calls for letters to be sent out proactively to homeowners with substantial damage.

Complying with FEMA's audit findings after the '16 flood means that **city-parish must develop a plan to rectify the homes found out of compliance and, in turn, homeowners must develop their own plans to mitigate the flood risk to their home.**

Sending out the notification letters is one step in the process for the city-parish, while Quality Engineering is supposed to help homeowners develop their own individual plans or help with appeals.

While home elevation or demolition and buyout are some of the most commonly cited options to mitigate flood risk, Joyner said **FEMA does offer other options in some cases, including flood-proofing for some commercial structures and even individual levees or barriers to protect homes.**

Lambert said homeowners who are working on their mitigation plan will continue to be able to have flood insurance while they are waiting on a resolution, a process that can take years as funding become available.

The new city-parish letters will have a telephone number for residents to contact, but officials noted that residents who haven't received a letter and are curious about their status can email to floods@brla.gov

The new website address is <http://www.brla.gov/floods>.

[Big FEMA recalibration coming: Will Louisiana residents see breaks or hikes on flood insurance?](#)