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All In On Hazard Mitigation

All 62 Lehigh Valley municipalities. Lehigh and Northampton counties. The Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency. The Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The effort to bring the region a greener, more resilient future is now universally endorsed.

The adoption of the Lehigh Valley Hazard Mitigation Plan in March by Northampton County Council ended months of approvals from both counties, every municipality in the Valley, and state and federal authorities for a plan designed to prepare the region for disasters such as hurricanes, winter storms, floods and the drug overdose crisis.

With full adoption, every community in the region is now eligible for federal grants to fund some of the more than 1,100 projects written into the plan by Valley municipal and emergency management leaders.

“This is a huge deal for our region. It’s important that we have a plan, but even more important that every municipality has joined,” said Northampton County Executive Lamont G. McClure, Jr. “I’d like to thank our Director of Emergency Management Todd Weaver and Lehigh County Director Scott Lindenmuth for driving this process.”

The plan, drafted by the LVPC, in partnership with the state, Lehigh and Northampton counties, and every Lehigh Valley municipal government, was an effort that also included input from private companies, community stakeholders and the public.

“In today’s world, the Boy Scout motto of ‘Be Prepared’ is the best way to shield our citizens from disaster,” said Lehigh County Executive Phillips Armstrong. “It’s great to see everyone pulling in the same direction on such an important project.”

The federally required plan – and update of the 2013 plan – was completed in October with strategies to combat 25 natural and man-made hazards that include everything from sinkholes to terrorism to extreme temperature. Every community contributed data to build the plan and each submitted a menu of strategies to mitigate the damage of potential hazards. Most every municipality included actions to buy generators to keep essential services powered during outages. Many included strategies to make their communities more flood resistant and some are planning new public education programs that instruct people how to contend with such problems as opioid overdose and the impacts of the Spotted Lantern Fly.

Invasive Species, Pandemic & Infectious Disease and Drug Overdose Deaths were added as hazards this year, based on input during a year-long public engagement effort.

“When you look at this plan, you see the whole Lehigh Valley working together to create a more resilient future,” said LVPC Executive Director Becky Bradley. “It’s an economic initiative, it’s an environmental initiative, it’s a safety initiative and it’s a testament to the hard work of people in every corner of the region.”

And that work is really just beginning. Now every community's task will be to implement as many projects as they can. Being eligible for federal grants funding will help some of them. Over the past 10 years, more than \$3 million in federal grant were awarded for such projects as buying generators for several communities and enabling others to remove repeatedly damaged structures from flood zones.

More Lehigh Valley communities will be eligible for grants this time, now that every community has bought in. New federal funding becomes available each year. The plan is flexible to adapt to changing conditions and any changes can be added to the plan during annual amendments to it, said the LVPC's Director of Environmental Planning, Geoff Reese, who managed the plan update effort. The plan expires in 2023, when a full update will be required.

"It's a living document that changes as municipalities work to become more resilient," Reese said. "The key is making hazard mitigation planning part of everyday life for all of our communities. The best plan is one that is constantly evolving."

The plan has a 275-page main document, but also includes another nearly 2,800 pages of data in appendices and separate annexes for every municipality. The plan is available at <http://lvpc.org/hazard-mitigation.html>