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March 11, 2011

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Hon. Lynn Gilmore Canton
Regional Administrator
The Federal Emergency Management Agency
26 Federal Plaza
New York, NY 10278-0002

Re: Rejection of Flood Insurance Rate Map for Buffalo's Old First Ward.

Dear Administrator Canton:

FEMA's proposed designation of a base flood elevation of 577.05 for the Old First Ward of the City of Buffalo is inappropriate as it is not based on the best available science or any reasonable interpretation thereof. As such, I write to insist on a revision of the resultant proposed Flood Insurance Rate Map (FIRM).

Consider the following data:

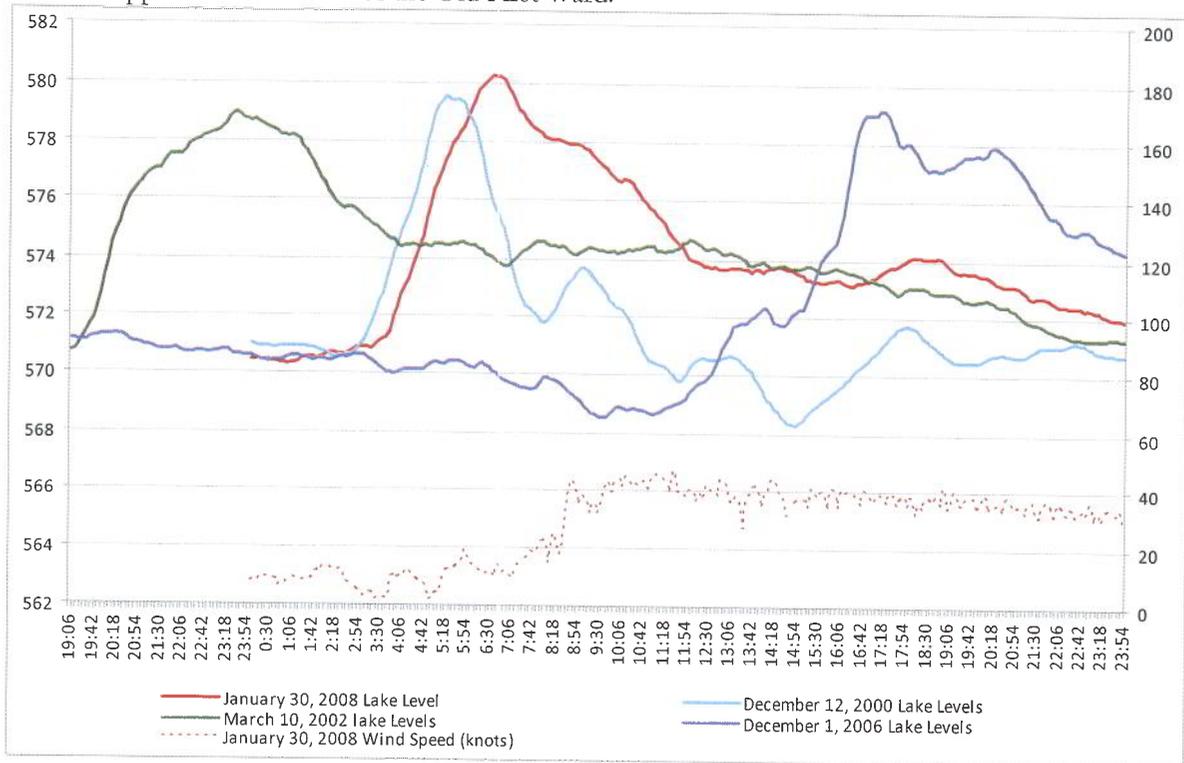
- According to the most recent available estimates, the open-lake 1% base flood elevation (BFE) for the stretch of Lark Erie which includes the City of Buffalo is 579.64 feet above sea level (ILDG 85)¹.
- The Old First Ward is not an open-coast area, but is rather substantially inland. It is 2.57 miles from the outer breakwater to the Ohio Street Bridge via the Buffalo River, and 1.86 miles from mouth of the Buffalo River to the Ohio Street Bridge.
- It is unreasonable to assume that a given 1% BFE on the open lake will correlate to a BFE about two miles inland. If it is true that "water levels along shorelines situated behind islands and in bays and estuaries may vary considerably from open-coast levels",² then this must also be the case for inland areas.
- Water seeks its own level, but it takes time for wind and waves to push water inland. As there are no gauges in the Old First Ward, we do not know, specifically, how long it takes for high water from a seche event to move up the Buffalo River. We can, however, make an order-of-magnitude approximation by looking at other storm events in other geographies. For example, we know that the crest associated with Hurricane Rita, with wind speeds of 85

¹ MOD for FEMA, Analysis of Wave Height and Water Level Variability on the Great Lakes, Technical Memorandum, March, 2009, pp, 24, 30.

² USACE for FEMA, Phase I Revised Report on Great Lakes Open-Coast Flood Levels, Detroit, April, 1988.

knots, advanced up the Calcasieu River at a speed of 5.9 mph.³ When we consider that a Lake Erie seche event may have wind speeds of about 40 knots (see chart on next page), we can fairly estimate that it is going to take better than ½ hour for a high lake level to result in a high river level at the Old First Ward.

- The rub, however, is that we all know that high water levels associated with Lake Erie seche events simply don't last that long (see chart below). Put differently, the high-water events along Buffalo's Lake Erie shoreline do not sustain their high water levels long enough to support an inundation of the Old First Ward.



Given that we know that the use of an open-lake BFE in the Old First Ward is inappropriate and has no basis in science, I insist that you revise the proposed map to reflect flood elevations associated with 100 year riverine flooding on the Buffalo River, which will effectively remove virtually all of the Old First Ward from the mandates of the National Flood Insurance Program.

I look forward to further dialogue on this pressing issue, and I thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Brian Higgins
Member of Congress

³ USGS, Monitoring and Mapping Hurricane Inland Storm Tides, Prepared by Mike Turco, Jeery W. East, Ben D. McGee, Brian E. McCallum, Michael E. Dorsey, James L. Pearman, Robert R. Holmes, D. Phil Trunipseed, Asbury H. Sallenger, Charles Berenbrock, Robert R. Mason, Jr.. Transmitted to my office at my request by USGS Ruston Program Office January 18, 2011.