MUD approval for housing plan adds insult to injury

By Jim Blackburn

The recent Houston City Council vote approving a municipal utility district to assist financing the conversion of the Pine Crest Golf Course for a housing development raises numerous issues about necessary changes in our current attitudes and thinking. The council vote offers a learning moment about who we are and where we are going — and where we’re not going.

Let me be clear. Flood plains are dangerous areas. People can lose their lives as well as their property. That is reality No. 1. Flood plains are not safe areas for development. Period. Now, there are adaptations that can be made to reduce the risk of property damage, but that does not eliminate the fact that these areas are more dangerous than adjacent, higher-elevation areas.

When discussing flood plains, it is important to note that our flood plain boundaries are changing. Our current mapped 100-year flood plains are out of date and obsolete. They are not a current indicator of risk. They will be changed in the future. That is why both Harris County and the city of Houston have adopted the 500-year flood plain as the current regulatory elevation, a very positive and important step that should not have been controversial, but was.

The current city regulations allow development in the 500-year flood plain if the slab of the house is elevated two feet above that level. However, the fact that a development is legal in this flood plain does not mean it is desirable or safe. The land upon which the home is placed will flood. The home may not flood, but the streets and yards will in a large storm event.

Why should we be subsidizing development with public financing, such as what’s provided by a MUD, when residents may not be able to get to and from these homes during floods? Where their homes will be surrounded by seawage-laden flood waters? Where emergency response vehicles may not have access during flood events? Where first responders might have to come in and remove people from their homes at risk to their own lives and health?

This scenario is all too familiar and does not represent change. It is simply more of the same with the homes built at higher slab elevations. That is not progress, and that is why the April 25 City Council vote is so perplexing. From what I observed, there was no serious discussion about the possibility that developing flood plains, although legal, is a bad idea. Simply stated, we need more room for water in Houston and Harris County — spaces where water and people do not coexist during floods.

Speaker after speaker at the SSPEED Center conference at Rice University in February talked about the trends in rainfall, that Harvey was not a "one-off" event, that storms such as Harvey and Tax Day and Allison were definitely in our future. Our rainfall amounts are increasing year after year, decade after decade.

Dr. Kathryn Hayhoe, an expert in climate change, spoke recently at the Progressive Forum, and her message was clear. She repeats data, and the data prove that our climate is changing, that our rainfall amounts are changing. But she said something more important — that we cannot navigate the road ahead by looking in the rearview mirror, that the road ahead has a curve or two coming at us. And we must anticipate and navigate these curves or we will fail as a community.

All of our mapping on flood plains is based upon looking in our rearview mirror. To look forward is to project that our rainfall rates will increase and that our current 500-year flood plain is likely to be much too small to handle our future floods.

The lesson to be learned from this discussion is that we are not close to the type of change — to the type of understanding — that is necessary for Houston to make the transitions that will ensure our economic future, our health and our safety.

We cannot engineer our way to safe, flood plain development, and to subsidize development in these areas is to add insult to potential injury. We must do better.

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