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TOP STORY

WWU students to study Stanwood flood impact

By JEREMIAH O'HAGAN Staff Reporter Jul 31, 2017 Updated Jul 31, 2017



David Davidson, program coordinator for Western Washington University, and Nyla Thursday, intern, shoot benchmark elevations in west Stanwood. WWU's Sustainable Community Partnerships program will be surveying west Stanwood Aug. 21-25 to collect data related to flooding.

Jeremiah O'Hagan

For a week at the end of August, a small army of Western Washington University students, wearing aquamarine WWU hats and orange safety vests, will be a normal sight around Stanwood.

The students, under program director David Davidson, will collect data, Aug. 21-25, including elevations above sea level, which they'll use to create a web-based, visual flood map of the city.

Once the map is completed in 2018, it will serve several purposes.

Most obviously, Stanwood residents can access the map to see the potential effects of floods on their properties and to plan what they might do to prevent damage.

Second, the city hopes the students' work will qualify the city for FEMA's federal community rating system, which would reduce flood insurance costs by 10-percent citywide

City staff could also use the data to bolster requests for grant funds.

And, in Bellingham, WWU students in advanced courses will use the data for class projects.

Nyla Thursday, Davidson's intern, will actually build the web-based map from the data collected.

Thursday is studying geography, geographic information systems (GIS) and disaster risk reduction at WWU.

"This project is a direct application of all three," she said.

Davidson started the program, called Sustainable Community Partnership (SCP), last year at WWU. The university recruits a new partner each academic year.

Edmonds was the first. WWU students tackled 11 projects for the city in 2016.

This year, SCP is working with Stanwood and Skagit County, which are splitting the cost. Stanwood is paying \$30,000, which includes the flood-mapping.

The students will also explore options for financing and retrofitting individual properties to avoid flood damage, Davidson said.

Deborah Knight, city administrator, said she was excited for the opportunity.

"We've been struggling to address the cost of flood insurance, and this study should give us some good information to take to property owners," she said.

The students who participate in the SCP in Stanwood are enrolled in various WWU courses and degrees.

"Professors always need partners and projects for their upper-level classes," Davidson said.

Last week, Davidson and Thursday shot some benchmark elevations around the west end of Stanwood to create a grid. In late August, they will return with students to fill in the grid and collect additional information, including the elevation of homes' lowest floors, and the types of foundations.

This information, along with existing data already collected by the city, county and state, will be used to build the online map, which will show potential flood levels in comparison to home elevations and other information.

Davison is relying on community input to help make the project as successful as possible.

Thursday plans to have an information booth at National Night Out on Tuesday, Aug. 1, where residents can find out more about WWU's program and its benefits to the city.

And, residents are invited to an open house Tuesday, Aug. 8, 4-6 p.m. at Stanwood City Hall.

Finally, a survey is available until Aug. 21 at the city's website, ci.stanwood.wa.us.

"We would like some additional information about homes, which can be provided via the online survey," Davidson said.

None of the students or professors will be paid for their involvement in the project, Davidson said. They are participating as part of their coursework.

The money Stanwood is paying helps fund Davidson's position as program coordinator, as well as expenses like transportation, printing and supplies.

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