If you tried calling me at the office the last couple of weeks, you may have been surprised at my voicemail message. Not surprised at getting my voicemail, since I'm frequently in a meeting or otherwise away from the phone. But surprised that I was out of the office. It wasn't vacation; I had two out-of-town engagements on behalf of the city.

Two weeks ago, Building Inspector Dave Wartenweiler and I attended a four-day training seminar on "Managing Floodplain Development through the National Flood Insurance Program." The course was put on by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). This was the same course they normally conduct at their offices in Maryland, so having the course offered locally was a great opportunity. And, with our having newly drawn floodplain maps, this was an important and valuable class.

FEMA takes the position that floodplain management is a three-legged stool comprised of mapping, regulations, and insurance. So the course, obviously, focused on each of these areas and their relation to the others.

Under the mapping section, we learned about the history and types of floodplain maps, how they are developed, and how to read them. Although the maps may have a variety of zones each with a different flood-risk classification, the standard most commonly used has a one-percent chance of being equaled or exceeded in any given year. This is the base flood elevation (BFE) that most permits, regulations, and insurance requirements will consider. Also important is that the map should not be used by itself, the accompanying flood insurance study provides the background information and more detail than the map alone.

FEMA is also slowly going through a map modernization process to make them available in a computerized geographic information system (GIS) format. Rock County has loaded the information for the new maps into its computer system. You can access it online at http://68.249.68.135/Rock/ then click on View Map. You can search by address to find your property, check to make the FEMA Floodplains layer active, and click the Refresh Map button.

The regulations part of the course dealt with the permitting process for placing fill and construction within the floodplain. By participating in the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP), the city must comply with certain regulations to minimize the risk and damage to any improvements in the floodplain. And that means the city is responsible for overseeing the permitting process locally.

In some instances it may mean requiring specific floodproof construction, it may mean requiring raising the elevation of the site, or it may mean prohibiting construction altogether. One of the drawbacks of the course was that it was a standardized, national course covering FEMA's minimum regulations. But Wisconsin has adopted a higher standard of regulation. These weren't covered in the course, but a couple of Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) employees were also taking the class and helped discuss some of the Wisconsin regulations.

The third part of the course gave an overview of flood insurance itself. Flood insurance rates are based on the map, hence the formal name of Flood Insurance Rate Map (FIRM). Basically, the

zone that a structure is located within and the structure's lowest floor elevation compared to the BFE determine the rate of insurance. And the more prone to flooding damage, the higher the rate. The other main point about flood insurance is that although flood insurance is mandatory for any property located within the floodplain financed by federally-backed mortgage, any property in or out of a floodplain is eligible to purchase flood insurance.

Later this fall, I expect the city to apply to participate in the Community Rating System (CRS) program. By taking steps – such as public education, maintaining ditches, and improving BFE data – to reduce flood damage, the city can reduce insurance rates for all properties within the city under CRS.

One shortcoming of the course was that it did not spend a lot of time on "non-conforming" structures built prior to revisions to the FIRM. With a newly designated floodplain in a pre-existing neighborhood, this is an area we're going to need to work through together. It is unscheduled at this point, but the DNR has agreed to come some evening early this fall to answer questions in a "straight talk about floodplains" meeting.

So I was out of the office, but we have some very capable staff here at City Hall and they didn't miss a beat in my absence. Then last week, I attended a two day "Chief Executives Workshop" put on by the League of Wisconsin Municipalities. Geared toward mayors and administrators, the seminar touched on a few topics related to city management, especially in times of tight fiscal constraints. It wasn't as essential as the floodplain course but was still informative and worthwhile.

One of the presentations that really caught my interest was on creating livable communities as part of a local economic development strategy. This was timely, since Evansville recently adopted an economic development plan. They talked about physical and social assets of a community having an impact on people's residential and employment choices, and in turn local development.

Different amenities and services may appeal to different segments of the population, but a community can build on and emphasize its existing physical and social assets to enhance the quality of a community. As the presenter said, "Livable communities don't happen by themselves, you need policies and plans in place to support your community's vision and identity."

Besides the actual classroom presentations, there is also value in mingling with and meeting mayors and administrators from other cities. They've already created a stormwater utility, they're working on energy conservation, or they've got some other issue. And there is a ton of value in learning from others.

The two courses were worth the time, but being out of the office now leaves me playing catch-up with some of the routine items, paperwork, and phone calls that I missed.