Give land back to the Iowa River

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Before the Iowa River takes back Parkview Terrace — yet again

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Guest Opinion

A preliminary historical sketch of how the Normandy neighborhood came to be developed may help explain why the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the state of Iowa and Iowa City should buy out the homeowners and use the land to create natural grasslands or wetlands.

Pre-development ownership

During the 1950s, before the Coralville Dam was completed, Iowa City's decision to permit the building of a residential neighborhood along the land to the wetlands that it has always used. Iowa City's decision to permit the building of a residential neighborhood along the Iowa River in the late 1950s was an urban planning mistake that half a century later has bequeathed catastrophic consequences to those living there.

The commission warned the council that the "degree of complacency has developed in Iowa City by a lack of understanding of the flood history of the Iowa River and the amount of control possible by the Coralville dam." Seeking to avoid being "charged with a culpable lack of foresight if we did not call to your attention that certain hazards yet remain," the commission emphasized that the city's growth and "the urge to use vacant land of close proximity to the university makes the old problem a critical one for solution in the near future."

Not suitable for residential development

On June 12, 1969, the commission wrote to the council again about the proposed Parkview Terrace subdivision, communicating the contents of a motion passed at its last meeting. "In view of the location of the proposed sub-division, on the flood plain of the Iowa River with its vulnerability to high ground water levels, wash from surrounding bluffs, and even possible flooding on rare occasions, it is believed that this area is not suitable for residential development."

It should be emphasized that the commission was not composed of a bunch of 'anti-progress yahoos,' its chairman and key figure, Joseph Howe, was a long-time professor and chairman of hydrology and mechanics at UI who had professionally studied the Iowa River. The vice chairman was Allen Tester, a UI professor of geology. And long-time State Geologist H. Garland a. Henney was also a member. Other members included Charles Barker, Richard Feddersen, James Pearson and Sam Whiting.

All of the commission members, including two real estate businessmen, opposed the building plans and supported using the land for City Park or some similar project. Nevertheless, four days later the City Council unanimously approved the plat and subdivision.

The council's rejection of the commission's report has been seen in the context of various developmental pressures, sheer boosterism and perhaps the council members' personal denial of the possibility that the water could ever go over the spillway.

Curiously, less than a month later the City Council announced that it deemed it advisable to buy from the same owners 27.1 acres contiguous to the new subdivision in order to expand City Park westward.

Later that summer the council bought the land at what was apparently a low $500 an acre.

What today's council should do

Iowa City's decision to permit the building of a residential neighborhood along the river in the late 1950s was an urban planning mistake that half a century later has bequeathed catastrophic consequences to those living there.

To rectify their predecessors' distorted judgment, the mayor and the City Council should now do everything in their power to promote a buyout and to return the land to the wetlands that it has always been.

Marc Linder, an Iowa City resident since before the 1993 flood, hopes that this tentative sketch will prompt both those with personal recollections of the 1950s to come forward with additional information and others to dig deeper in documentary sources.