

City of Watseka

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Robert J. Harwood

Mayor

The City of Watseka is located in east central Illinois and is the County seat of Iroquois County. It is the largest community in the County with a population of 5300. Watseka has two manufacturing facilities, a local hospital with a 24/7 emergency room, three auto dealerships selling new and used autos, a good school district, and a good retail base with some nationwide chain stores and restaurants. It is a community worth saving.

Witseka is bordered on the North side by the Iroquois River. This river is approximately 94 miles long and drains approximately 2150 square miles of land. The river originates in Indiana and continues north from Watseka to the Kankakee River.

Witseka is also bordered by the Sugar Creek which comes in from the South and continues along the West side of town. The Sugar Creek originates in Southeast Iroquois County and its tributaries drain approximately 555 square miles. The Sugar Creek and Iroquois River meet on the Northwest side of Watseka and become the Iroquois River. Combined they drain over 2700 square miles, most of which comes to Watseka.

Witseka also has the lowest elevation along both the Iroquois River and Sugar Creek watershed. The elevation from the confluence of the two to the Kankakee River is nearly flat. The combination of two waterways, low elevation and poor drainage combine to make Watseka very flood prone.

Witseka has suffered floods since it was incorporated in 1867. Recently flooding has become more of a serious problem. The reasons are many as stated above. One of the more recent factors is the never ending tiling of agricultural fields. This does not bring more water, but we feel it does get water to Watseka much faster than ever before. Once water gets here it tends to take days for it to move on.

In 2008 Watseka was hit by a serious flood. Depending who you talk to it may or may not have been a 100 year flood. There were over 400 homes impacted and over 200 with some type of damage. There was a FEMA declaration. Some homeowners took advantage of the situation and elevated their homes, others did not. FEMA also indicated at that time that they could not spend billions to protect millions and that is hard to argue with.

In June of 2015 Watseka suffered a smaller flood with little to no structural damage to homes. Approximately 2 weeks later, following extremely heavy rainfall for days, Watseka flooded again. The River and Creek were still at bank full as the rains began and they continued to swell. The July 2015 flood was slightly less than the 2008 flood. Over 400 homes impacted. Over 200 suffered some type of flood damage. 41 were declared "substantially damaged" as per the National Flood Insurance Program, which Watseka participates in. The State of Illinois declared Watseka a "disaster area" but we failed to meet FEMA numbers and did not get a FEMA

declaration, therefore there was no assistance for anyone unless there was flood insurance on the structure. Several homes are being elevated and some demolished.

In December of 2015 Watseka suffered another flood that nearly equaled the July 2015 flood. Again over 400 homes were impacted and over 200 suffered some type of flood damage. The vast majority of homes damaged in December are the same homes damaged in July. These people were just beginning to get back to a degree of normal from the July flood. In some cases they lost the same thing in December that they lost in July, furnaces, water heaters, washers, dryers, and personal belongings. In many cases they have not paid for their July loss and now have a second loss. Many of these people having a feeling of despair and hopelessness.

To date 10 additional homes have or will be declared “substantially damaged”. The State has again declared Watseka a “disaster area” along with 22 other counties state wide. Once again we wait to see if there is a FEMA declaration.

It is our understanding that one of the reasons that downstate Illinois has difficulty receiving FEMA declarations is the damage assessment numbers are based on Chicago and the surrounding area. If this is so then there is no way that downstate Illinois can meet those numbers. If so then that explains why several small downstate communities that have suffered natural disasters in the past few years did not get FEMA assistance. If so this is grossly unfair to downstate Illinois and needs to be changed!

This community is worth saving. We know that there is very little that can be done to prevent flooding in Watseka. The geography is against us. Holding ponds and or lakes would have to be massive and cost prohibitive. Levees and dikes are expensive to build, maintain, and eventually they fail by breach or over-topping. In 1988 the Army Corp of Engineers completed a five year study to protect Watseka from a 100 year flood by implementing a levee system. For whatever reason no action was taken on this plan. It is our understanding that the Corp no longer recommends levees. This could be incorrect.

So what is left? Can we reduce the severity of flooding in Watseka? We are not asking to prevent flooding, just reduce it. The City has completed two big projects separating storm and sanitary sewers to handle runoff from rain events. These storm sewers held a lot of water underground during both flood events that more than likely would have been above ground. This might be a viable solution. Are there Federal Agencies that can assist in reducing the severity or have other suggestions? If so is there funding available to assist? We feel that it is time to ask our elected officials in Washington for assistance.

The City is encouraging elevations of homes in the flood plain. We have offered a grant of \$5000 to homeowners of “substantially damaged” homes to either elevate or demolish. The funds are coming from the City’s budget as we are getting no financial help from any other government entity. Many people cannot afford flood insurance. The City’s budget cannot sustain this for every flood. As of now this is the only direction the City has ever been given. Is that all there is?

Bob Harwood Mayor

This letter was sent to:
FEMA

Army Corp of Engineers

State Representative Tom Bennett
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State Senator Jason Barickman
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Springfield, IL 62706

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