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Niagara County invites public input in Hazard Mitigation Plan

The Niagara County Department of Emergency Services is inviting the public to take part in updating the county's Hazard Mitigation Plan (HMP), which is now live online. Those interested in participating can register at <https://tinyurl.com/2aame9b7>. The HMP was last updated in 2017.

"If you live in Niagara County, odds are you've been significantly impacted by floods, wind, and snow," said Jonathan Schultz, director of Emergency Services. "In a recent survey of 130 Niagara County residents, over 75 percent were significantly and negatively impacted by these hazard events in the past ten years. That's why continuing to update our Hazard Mitigation Plan is so important."

According to Schultz, nearly half of survey respondents said hazards damaged their home. Niagara County recorded more than \$38 million in damages from natural hazards between 1996 and 2018, according to NOAA's storm events dataset.

"Flooding is Niagara County's top natural hazard concern, with particular focus on the Lake Ontario shoreline, where rising lake levels caused extensive costly damage in recent years," said Schultz. "Flash flooding can also cause significant damages, like the extreme flood that hit the county in July 2021 that caused millions of dollars in damages. The increasing frequency of strong winds, snow storms, and extreme temperatures are also growing concerns in Niagara County."

Schultz said to combat hazard concerns, Niagara County is working with local municipalities and the University at Buffalo Regional Institute to update its HMP. Updating the plan will make all Niagara County cities, towns and villages eligible for federal and state hazard grant funds.

"The plan gives us a way to work together across the county to lay out strategies, since many of our communities share many common hazard risks. For example, critical infrastructure may be outdated and vulnerable to hazards. Many public facilities are in need of backup power. The invasive Emerald Ash Borer led to a spread of dead ash trees that can fall during extreme winds, causing power outages, property damages and road closures. Fallen trees can also build up with debris and silt to clog streams, creeks, and ditches, creating new flooding issues."

Niagara County is one of the first counties across New York to create a hazard mitigation plan using MitigateNY, the State's new online hazard mitigation planning platform developed by New York State's Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services (NYS DHSES) and the University at Albany's Visualization and Informatics Laboratory (AVAIL). The plan includes separate sections for each municipality that can be accessed by a dropdown menu in the top right panel.

Schultz said the public can review the plan the draft plan at <https://niagara.mitigateny.org>. Feedback will be accepted during a one-month public comment period through June and July. There is a feedback form linked on the website or comments can be emailed to bwconley@buffalo.edu.

Following a review by the state, local municipalities will formally adopt the plan, ensuring that all local governments are working together to mitigate hazards and address pressing concerns. Niagara County's Hazard Mitigation Plan must be approved by FEMA for the county and its towns, cities, and villages to be eligible for FEMA grants. The expected completion date is July 2022.

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