How would you plan viable and sustainable communities situated in disaster-prone regions? Can you answer this question effectively?

Participants of the 1998 CIP Conference in Winnipeg were asked to answer this question during a mobile workshop that examined the experiences of Manitoba in the 1997 Flood of the Century. As part of the workshop, participants were toured through some of the hardest-hit areas of the Red River Valley. Guiding the tour was Mr. Larry Whitney, spokesperson for the Province of Manitoba during the 1997 flood and a recent appointee to the International Red River Basin Task Force.

The tour participants were guided down roads and highways that only a short time ago would have been impassable for any vehicle other than a boat. In our travels, we passed homes and communities where the damage from the 1997 flood was still very evident. Participants witnessed abandoned homes and those where owners had accepted the challenge of rebuilding. From elevated building sites to ten-foot high dykes, we witnessed the dramatic reshaping of the human landscape caused by the reality of inhabiting a prairie river flood plain.

Following the tour, we returned to the St. Norbert's Art and Cultural Centre, where, only a short distance from the Red River, we examined the challenges facing effective planning in flood-prone areas. To provide a basis for discussion, Mr. Whitney gave a presentation depicting the costs and human impact of the Manitoba experience. In smaller discussion groups, participants were able to utilize their own personal experiences to define key components for successful planning in disaster-prone areas.

One issue that received much attention was the need for planning to be proactive. Often a popular point of discussion, this concept was never more evident than in Manitoba's flood experience where the proactive (and previously criticized) construction of the Red River Flood Way helped save Winnipeg and reduce the financial impact by diverting the water around the City.

In contrast to the proactive planning successes, the participants suggested the Flood revealed areas where planning had been less proactive. This resulted in land use patterns that were not representative of sustainable development for disaster-prone areas.

Participants identified that the flood-prone characteristics of the area required tighter application of regulations on the location and conditions of residential development. The comments from the participants suggested that more attention must be given to both limiting personal losses and to controlling government financial costs, by restricting the level of habitation in high-risk disaster areas.

In suggesting tighter land use planning, participants noted (with surprise) the desirability of living close to the Red River and recommended that an increased public awareness is necessary to successfully implement viable land use policies.

The workshop participants' discussion and recommendations provided a unique and enjoyable opportunity for planners from across the country to expand their understanding of planning, especially in disaster-prone areas. The Flood Workshop provided planners with an informative look into Manitoba's flood experience at a more human scale. In doing so, it allowed planners from across the country to share an experience that will inevitably broaden our understanding of a unique aspect of planning.

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