

## Pima County may be in the market for your flood-susceptible property

By Erica Meltzer

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

There are parts of Pima County where the pitter-patter of rain on the roof eventually will turn into the roar of rushing floodwater.

If not in 1983 or 2003 or 2006, then someday.

And when residents of those areas find the rising waters lapping at their doorsteps — or their countertops — they still will find at least one buyer willing to pay market price for their property.

Since 1984, Pima County has bought more than 9,000 acres through its Floodprone Land Acquisition Program.

It bought out 63 property owners along the Cañada del Oro in the aftermath of the 2003 floods at a cost of \$10.2 million.

While it bought just five properties after last year's floods, the larger homes, on three- and four-acre lots along Rincon Creek and Sabino Creek, totaled \$2.7 million.

County officials say the program saves money by removing people from harm's way. They say it is only fair to protect people who built before the county implemented its flood-plain management ordinance in 1972.

"In most cases, the property was built prior to us having any land-use regulations regarding flood plains," said County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry. "You might say that's their own fault, but in many cases, there was no disclosure."

But program manager Connie Maraschiello said many homes bought through the program were built after 1972, and occasionally the county buys out a property owner who flouted the flood-plain ordinance and built without a permit, though it hasn't happened recently.

"We have situations where someone has built appropriately," Maraschiello said. "They may not have been in the flood plain to begin with, but more development occurred, increasing runoff and creating a flood plain."

Flood Control Director Suzanne Shields said in the early years of flood-plain management, the county had little historical data to create accurate flood-plain maps. So information provided to home builders was less than perfect.

For example, the county only had 10 years of data along the Rincon Creek, where it bought four homes after last year's floods. One had 41 inches of water in it.

Jackie Decker and her husband, Billie, woke up to ankle-deep water at 4:45 a.m. on July 31, 2006, in their home off Old Spanish Trail. Jackie Decker said she jumped out of bed and threw on her swimsuit, thinking she would might have to swim for it.

Fortunately, the water receded after reaching just 1 foot. Their neighbors were not so lucky. One family spent several hours on their roof.

The Deckers' 30-year-old home had never flooded before. They had flood insurance because their lender required it, but when they learned the county had no plans to install flood-control devices on Rincon Creek, they decided to sell rather than rebuild.

If the county hadn't made an offer on their home, the Deckers would have had no choice but to rebuild and take their chances, Jackie Decker said.

When deciding what to buy, the county puts the highest priority on occupied homes with actual flood damage.

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"Our highest priority is to get people out of the flood plain," Maraschiello said. "For these people, it's not a matter of if, but when, it will flood."

Next comes important riparian habitats. The program bought 4,000 acres along Cienega Creek before there was much development in the area. Also land along four key watercourses — Cañada del Oro, Rincon Creek, Sabino Creek and the Brawley Wash in Avra Valley — get top consideration.

The program, funded through the flood control district's separate property tax, gets \$3 million a year. If the monsoon season passes without a major flood, the money can be used to buy land that hasn't flooded but is at risk for flooding.

When setting a price, county appraisers ignore the mold on the walls and water filling the firepit, offering an amount that assumes the home was not flood-damaged, so the family can move to a similar home.

The program is voluntary, but often the county tells owners they will never get another building permit if they remain.

The house and any other structures are demolished.

Huckelberry said eventually the county would like to have all the flood-prone land under public control.

He said creating undisturbed areas around waterways is just as important as structural flood control efforts like bank protection and channelization.

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