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SEEKING HIGHER GROUND

After Hurricane Sandy, South Shore residents mull whether to elevate their homes

By KRISTEN D'ANDREA

Nearly five months after Hurricane Sandy, affected homeowners have entered the long-term recovery and rebuilding phase. As many face the difficult — in other words, costly — decision of whether to elevate their homes, some communities are easing building regulations to permit elevation while others are not, leading to calls for coordination from confused residents and frustrated contractors.

"We don't want people to just rebuild, as they'll be in the same situation after the next storm," said Mitchell Pally, CEO of the Long Island Builders Institute, an Islandia-based trade group. "We want homeowners to raise their homes up so they are higher than the water flow." The problem, he said, is this violates the zoning rules in many cases.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency requires houses to be elevated in flood zones; and New York state requires builders to exceed the FEMA base flood elevation by two feet. However, unless many towns' height limits are changed, residents would need to obtain variances from their local zoning board of appeals, which could create further delays for displaced homeowners looking to rebuild.

"Towns and villages are beginning to realize this is an issue, and they're slowly making changes," Pally said.

To be sure, the Town of Babylon has eased its height codes, according to Kevin Bonner, director of communications. Last week, the Islip town board voted to amend its code height restrictions, allowing home-

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JAMES BOULTER: The varying height requirements in Long Island towns and villages are creating confusion.

owners to build up to either 35 or 28 feet (depending on their district), measured from FEMA's flood line rather than the ground. FEMA's flood line is two feet below the lowest floor.

In the flood zones, the maximum height is now 20 feet from the FEMA flood line in Babylon, Bonner said.

In the Village of Lindenhurst, officials have not eased the building height restrictions; however, they are waiving the fee if homeowners request a height variance to comply with flood zone requirements, said Shawn Cullinane, village clerk treasurer.

"We're not eliminating the height restrictions because they don't affect 90 percent of homes in the village," he said.

Amityville village was scheduled to hold a public hearing on March 11 to discuss legislation that would allow homeowners to elevate their houses as much as three feet above the flood line, even if it means exceeding building height restrictions. Patchogue passed a similar law earlier this year.

Calls for Coordination

The fact that each town and village has varying height requirements is adding to the confusion and difficulty homeowners are experiencing, said James Boulter, whose firm, Boulter Pfleger Architects, is in Islip.

"In Lindenhurst, you can raise a two-

story house to 'FEMA plus two' [in other words, exceed the FEMA base flood elevation by two feet] and it's not considered a height variance," Boulter said. "But I have a client who, at FEMA plus two, would have flooded during Sandy. He wants to [raise his home] to FEMA plus five, but the town has a 26-foot height requirement, so now he's a variance," meaning he will be spending more time in limbo and out of his house.

Last month, regional leaders convened for the "Suffolk After Sandy Roundtable: Preparing for Hurricane Season 2013 and Beyond," a joint meeting of the Long Island Regional Planning

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Higher ground: Elevating a home is costly

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Council, the Suffolk County Planning Commission, the Suffolk County Supervisors Association and the Suffolk County Village Officials Association. One result of the roundtable discussion was the decision to create sub-committees, one of which will focus on building codes, according to Marianne Garvin, president and CEO of the Community Development Corp. of Long Island.

"It would help if we had one recommended code that each town could adopt," Garvin said, noting there are 10 individual towns in Suffolk County alone. "Homeowners need guidance, and we need to come together and have this conversation so we can agree on one standard and stand behind it."

Weighing the Cost of Elevating

Another problem facing residents looking to elevate their homes is the cost.

"The cost of a simple lift and foundation work for a small house is about \$70,000," Boulter said, adding the entire process takes several months.

Many factors need to be considered when determining whether or not to lift an existing residence, Boulter said. For instance, if the home sits on bog, an organic material with very low bearing capacity, raising the building will add weight and could lead to settlement, he said. Addition-

ally, the foundation should be evaluated to determine the best design for the new foundation system. If a foundation is in disrepair, the house may need to be moved off of the footprint; if the foundation is proper, additional footing, columns and beams may be added to the inside of the foundation wall for support, Boulter said.

Ray Acetella of Jaro Building in East Meadow is currently working on 20 homes with Sandy-related damage. He is in the early stages of tearing down one home and replacing it with a modular-raised home meeting FEMA restrictions.

"If you can afford to elevate your home, it's a no-brainer," Acetella said. "If you love your hamlet, your view, your school district or town amenities - whatever it is that makes you stay on the south shore of Long Island - it would be wise to raise your home."

Some financial relief is, or will be, available to homeowners. FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program will reimburse 75 percent of the costs to elevate homes in flood areas. Although administered by the state, local government must sponsor the program, Bonner said, noting it is a lengthy process.

The Town of Babylon has participated in FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program since Hurricane Irene in August 2011. The house-raising program was an-

nounced three to four months after Irene, Bonner said, and 11 residents qualified for the grant money.

"We received the long-form application for the 11 applicants from Irene at the end of January 2013, and we hope they'll receive their funding soon," Bonner said, cautioning residents displaced by Sandy not to count on this funding to get back into their homes in the next few weeks.

The Town of Babylon has compiled a list of 400 to 500 residents who are interested in FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, Bonner said, noting applications have not yet been released and funding has not been authorized for damage related to Sandy.

Additionally, under FEMA's National Flood Insurance Program, residents may be eligible for an Increased Cost of Compliance grant, which provides up to \$20,000 to help cover the cost of mitigation measures that will reduce flood risk. To be eligible for the ICC grant, homeowners must show that damage due to the flood equaled or exceeded 50 percent of the value of the home, Bonner said.

Residents can apply for both FEMA's ICC grant and the Hazard Mitigation Grant, and may coordinate FEMA funding with a Community Development Block Disaster Recovery Assistance grant program, set to begin soon, Garvin said. The



county will be the administrator for the CDBG program; exact rules and parameters have not yet been finalized.

In an ideal world, all funding and resources would have been available to homeowners as soon as disaster struck, Garvin said, noting homeowners have been doing the best they can to make decisions with the resources currently available to them.

"If you're in a flood zone, you might want to wait to see what all of the available resources are to help with the elevation of your home before making any decisions," she said.

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