A DISASTER THAT DOESN'T HAVE TO HAPPEN: THE EAST BATON ROUGE PARISH FLOOD OF 2001

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In 1983, the Amite River Basin and East Baton Rouge Parish (County) suffered a record flood that caused damages of $171.7 million in the Basin, including $65.3 million in the Parish (USACE 1984). This was only the most recent event for the watershed which has experienced four major floods from 1972-1983. Floods are certainly not a new occurrence to the region, but the events are becoming more costly and as a result are causing a greater public cry for government action to reduce the problem. The personal hardships and monetary losses could have been avoided to a significant degree had state and local governments initiated and implemented a rationale flood damage reduction program during the past 20 years. Instead inaction and myoptic planning for single purpose projects resulted in the present hazardous situation. It is the purpose of this paper to describe the problem and suggest a long-term solution that has been ignored by decision-makers.

Along with other sunbelt states, Louisiana grew rapidly during the sixties and seventies; this growth was particularly evident in East Baton Rouge Parish, the site of the state capital, the location of two major universities, and a center of petrochemical industries within the Mississippi River industrial corridor. In 1980, the population was 366,200, a 63% increase from 1960. Population projections (Maruggi and Fletes 1983) show that the Parish could grow to 551,100 by the year 2000, an increase of 66% over 1980. The earliest flood worthy of note was in 1907 when the population of the parish was approximately 33,000.

East Baton Rouge Parish is approximately 293,500 acres, 113,000 acres of which are within the 100-year flood zone (Federal Emergency Management Agency). The urban or built-up area grew from 24,500 acres in 1956 (Singleton 1972) to 81,400 acres in 1979 (USGS 1979). With pressures to convert more lands from agricultural uses, forests and open space, development extended more and more into floodprone areas, while at the same time compounding the problem by increasing runoff as a result of impervious surfaces, such as roads, roofs, and parking lots. The topography contributes to the problems through the low elevation and overall low relief of the Pleistocene terrace and Mississippi River valley. Streams are contained within well defined