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Repeat flood victims may have to relocate

By:

The victims of the back-to-back floods along the **Suncook River** can be helped but never made whole. The swollen river cut a new channel on Mothers Day 2006 and made a peninsula of what was once Epsom's Bear Island. The river flooded again this year on Patriots Day, inundating many homes for a second time.

Some 37 families remain out of their homes. Their stories are tragic, their losses large and their frustration palpable. They need more help to get back on their feet, but that assistance may not include money to rebuild homes destined to be flooded yet again.

Geologists, hydrologists, dam designers and other experts are still studying whether it would be feasible, economically, environmentally and geologically, to return the river to its old course past the Old Mill restaurant. The likelihood is slim.

Downstream dams that held back the river combined with mining that nibbled away at a large berm of sand helped Mother Nature along. The river went where it would have gone anyway in another 10,000 years, according to those who've studied it. Human activity advanced the geologic clock. Human activity, it seems almost certain, is also changing the climate and making heavy rains and extreme weather more likely.

The enormous New Hampshire flood of 1936 and the hurricane of 1938 prompted state and federal authorities to take preventive measures to protect lives and reduce future damage. Whole towns, including Hill and East Weare were moved, cemeteries and all, to create the huge flood district that has prevented catastrophic floods along the Warner, Contoocook, Piscataquog and Merrimack rivers ever since. That may be what has to happen to the hardest hit areas in Epsom and Suncook.

The federal flood insurance program and FEMA, the agency charged with responding when disaster strikes, both need overhaul. Flood insurance, as those who've received it know, never compensates victims for all they've lost. Nor, in many cases, did the people flooded out by the Suncook, have insurance.

Before the flood insurance system can be restructured, Congress will have to decide how many strikes, so to speak, before a property owner who rebuilds in a flood-prone area is out. It is neither wise nor responsible for taxpayers to compensate people who repeatedly put their lives and property in jeopardy.

After the 2005 Alstead flood, the state, primarily with federal money, bought the property of the victims who suffered the most damage. In most cases, the residents lost not just their homes but also their land. If the scientists do say the **Suncook River** can't economically be returned to its course, as we expect they will, the affected properties should be purchased and the land used for a park or conservation.

The state Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management should work with other agencies, local communities and the governor's office to let people know where things stand. It should also address the feeling, on the part of some victims of the flooding, that they are receiving less attention and help than did the Alstead victims.

The **Suncook River** flood victims need and deserve help in securing a safe place to live. Where that place is remains to be seen.