



## **Here's why Lewis & Clark County will no longer provide sandbags during flooding**

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As flood season nears, followed closely by wildfire season, Lewis and Clark County reminds residents it's never too early to prepare. A great place to start is to attend the Family and Emergency Preparedness Fair on March 2. This event is free, family friendly, and will include a number of activities designed to help people know what to do should they be impacted by flooding or other disaster situations.

We also want to stress the importance of personal preparedness and protection of personal property. One way to do this is to ensure you have sandbags and sand on-hand before flooding ever begins. It is the homeowners responsibility to buy, fill and transport sandbags. It is also the responsibility of property owners to ensure their multi-family and rental properties are protected. The County will no longer provide sandbags to private citizens; thus we encourage residents to make arrangements for access to sandbags if needed. Most home improvement and hardware stores as well as online stores, sell sandbags. Sand can be bought at local commercial gravel pits.

Providing sandbags to everyone is a cost that adds up quickly. We spent \$34,098.83 on sandbags last year, out of the general fund, providing sand and sandbags for private property protection. The County didn't know who took the bags, where they were going or if they made any difference in solving the flooding problem. The County's first responsibility is to protect critical public infrastructure like roads, bridges and schools that belong to all taxpayers. Providing sandbags was a goodwill gesture; however to continue this practice would be unfair to the other taxpayers of our County and we must manage general tax dollars responsibly.

In addition to the cost of sandbags last year, the Commission issued an Emergency Declaration that triggered a required 2 mil levy assessment on November 2018 and May 2019 taxes, which raised about \$130,000. By declaring an Emergency, the County was then eligible for State and Federal disaster funding.

For qualifying damages, the State will reimburse a portion of the flooding costs in the Helena Valley, minus the 2 mil levy. Total costs were calculated to be just under \$200,000. In order for that to be reimbursable, State statute says the 2 mil levy must be assessed. Additionally, a FEMA grant will reimburse the County for a portion of the damages in Augusta, though a 25% match is required. A portion of the 2 mil levy was used for this match, with the remainder going to equipment expenses such as pumps to protect public infrastructure like Rossiter Elementary. The use of the mil levy ultimately allowed for many reimbursements from the State and FEMA, saving all of us money. However, because the sandbags were used to protect private property, they are not reimbursable and the money spent will not be recouped.

We fully understand there are people in our community, such as the disabled and elderly, who are unable to do all that may be necessary to protect themselves and their property. This is where the Elkhorn Community Organizations Active in Disaster can lend assistance. The COAD is comprised of a variety of community assistance organizations that can help people in need. They can provide donations management services (including sandbag donations), labor, food, drinking water and other services as resources allow. They are a valuable resource for not only Lewis and Clark County, but also Jefferson and Broadwater Counties and all our residents.

We can all make a difference when it comes to helping our communities. By taking individual preparedness measures, checking on your neighbors, developing community plans and working together, we can all survive and thrive as a community through difficult times.

Commissioner Jim McCormick, Chair

Commissioner Susan Good Geise, Vice-Chair

Commissioner Andy Hunthausen