

Two years after the flood, much work left to do

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MASON CITY — Eighteen months ago, Lance and Tina Johnson were caught in a whirlwind of problems that started a half a year earlier when floodwaters swept into their home on June 8, 2008.

By January 2009 they were making mortgage payments and insurance payments on a house they couldn't live in, plus rent and renter's insurance on a place they hoped was just temporary.

All of it was taking a toll on their nerves and their checkbook.

Just when they thought things couldn't get worse, they did. In February Lance was laid off from his job at FedEx.

Today, near the second anniversary of the great flood, Lance and Tina and son Reid are much more stable.

Lance has a new job at Community Motors and the Johnsons have settled in to a new home they purchased.

"It's up on a hill," said Tina.

"With everything that was going on, it seemed like a long time for things to straighten out. But we got our buyout and really had no problem with the government part of things," she said.

She emphasized in an interview last week what she said 18 months ago — "Everyone experienced problems. Not just us."

The city purchased the Johnson's flood-ravaged home plus about 160 others and is now in the process of tearing them down.

And that has brought on a whole new set of challenges for the city.

Of 35 flood-damaged homes that have recently been inspected, only two were asbestos-free, according to Tricia Sandahl, city planner and flood plain administrator.

Another challenge has been upkeep. The City Council recently approved a contract with Brown's Lawn Service to mow the grass on the abandoned properties.

One problem in particular bugs Sandahl: Thieves are on a rampage.

Sandahl said intruders have entered about 70 flood-damaged homes in the last several months, taking most anything they could salvage.

"Some of them deserve a merit badge for stupidity," said Sandahl. "We've had instances of people lifting wet electrical panels.

"They've taken plants and even downspouts from around the houses. I don't understand it. People wouldn't think of going into Menards and stealing those kinds of things. Why do they think it's OK to steal from the city?"

“If anyone is caught removing items from a buyout property they will be arrested. This includes items such as plants, trees, shrubs, pavers and landscaping rock,” she said.

The city was awarded funds based on the outcome of an environmental assessment. The assessment was based on the city maintaining the trees, shrubs and other plantings on the lot. If these items are removed, the city risks having the funding for the buyout and demolition revoked, said Sandahl.

Many well-meaning residents have inquired about salvaging materials from the homes before the excavator demolishes them.

“The structures currently being demolished are structurally unstable,” said Sandahl. “The Iowa Department of Natural Resources and FEMA will not allow any salvage from these structures.”

In the future, if a structure is stable and the city has determined it is appropriate to salvage all or part of the house, Habitat for Humanity will be given salvage rights to the property, said Sandahl.

After all asbestos is identified and removed, Habitat will either remove individual elements from the building or move the building intact to a new lot.

If Habitat is not interested in the property, or if it chooses only to salvage individual elements of the building, the city will take bids from qualified demolition contractors to remove the structures from the lot.

“When the demolition contract is signed, the structure becomes the property of the contractor who may choose to allow interested persons to enter the structures and salvage individual items,” said Sandahl.

She said the city is working on a plan with the Iowa Department of Economic Development that would allow certain houses to be sold at public auction. The auction will not take place until 2012. No houses purchased with FEMA funds will be sold at auction.

With few exceptions, the city cannot sell any of the land on which the houses stood.

“The land must be maintained as open space. We are going to start discussions on future uses in the next month, said Sandahl.