30 Years of Hazard Mitigation: FEMA and the State of Oregon Highlight a Local Success Story

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BOTHELL, Wash. - In 2015 a Pulitzer Prize-winning New Yorker article, “The Really Big One,” brought the Cascadia Subduction Zone and a potential devastating 9.0 magnitude earthquake and subsequent tsunami to national attention. Here in the Pacific Northwest, emergency managers were already well aware of the threat and were taking action to mitigate the potential damage.

In 2014 the Portland Bureau of Emergency Management (PBEM) in Oregon and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) conducted a pilot program to use federal grants to seismically retrofit several dozen Portland homes. As of January 2018, with federal funding and a partnership with Portland based nonprofit Enhabit, Portland’s Seismic Demonstration Project had completed retrofits to over 100 residential homes.

“Portland is vulnerable to earthquakes from the Cascadia Subduction Zone, as well as smaller, closer faults,” said FEMA Regional Administrator Mike O’Hare. “Mitigation projects such as these will minimize potential damage and help people stay in their homes after an earthquake.”

The residential seismic retrofit projects for both the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) and Pre-Disaster Mitigation Grant program (PDM) grants focused on structural retrofits for single-family, wood-frame homes with unbraced cripple walls or sill plates that are not bolted to the foundation. These seismic retrofits are highly cost effective because they address major seismic deficiencies in single-family homes, they are highly effective in reducing seismic risk and the costs are low relative to building values.

The popularity of The New Yorker article resulted in nearly 4,000 people signing up to retrofit their homes. Enhabit was tasked with creating an equitable lottery system to choose which homes would receive the FEMA incentives. Homes must

be no taller than three stories and have a continuous concrete foundation. Under-represented and low-income homeowners were given preference. In the end, 150 homes were selected.

U.S. Map depicting BCR of earthquake mitigation by increasing strength and stiffness in new bu

The Portland seismic retrofit pilot set out to demonstrate how a $3,000 per-home incentive to mitigate seismic damage could have dramatic savings for local and federal government agencies and could increase the community's resiliency against natural disasters. The total FEMA cost for the project was $626,400 in both HMGP and PDM dollars. There are an additional 100,000 homes in Portland that need upgrading so PBEM, Oregon Office of Emergency Management and FEMA are working on a Pilot 2.0 to retrofit more homes.

"We appreciate FEMA's partnership with Portland to encourage homeowners to take action before the next earthquake to retrofit their homes," said Courtney Patterson, interim director of the Portland Bureau of Emergency Management. "We also look forward to future opportunities to expand the program."

More information about FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Assistance programs can be found at www.fema.gov/hazard-mitigation-assistance. Information about Oregon Hazard Mitigation Assistance is available at www.oregon.gov/OEM/emresources/Grants/Pages/HMA.aspx.

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