



FOOTHILLS COUNTY

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June 18, 2020

The Honourable Jason Kenney, M.L.A.
Premier of the Province of Alberta
Office of the Premier
307 Legislature Building
10800 - 97 Avenue
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

Re: Lower Highwood Flood Mitigation Program Funding

Dear Premier,

Subsequent to the catastrophic flood event on the Highwood River in June of 2013, the Town of High River was permitted by the Government of Alberta to construct extensive flood mitigation, in the form of dikes along the Highwood River to protect the Town from future extreme flood events. This work was undertaken after an expedited approvals process and was done with the understanding that it would create downstream impacts.

Extensive flood modelling and analysis showed that the diking in High River altered the flow split between the Highwood and Little Bow rivers and as a result, 109 properties in Foothills County downstream on the Highwood River were predicted to be negatively impacted, of which 11 had impacted residences. In some cases, as much as an additional meter of water was anticipated at these residences in a 2013 equivalent event.

Starting in 2016, after the Deltares report made it clear that the flows in the Highwood and Little Bow would not be re-balanced, Foothills County began working with staff from the Resilience and Mitigation Branch of Alberta Environment to come up with a plan to mitigate the increased risk that had been created for our residents. After submitting several different proposals over the course of 14 months, Foothills County eventually submitted a scaled back proposal for Phase I of the *Lower Highwood Flood Mitigation Program* in January 2018, which contemplated buy-outs for the 11 properties with impacted residences, at a total cost of \$12,853,628.

In June of last year, we wrote to thank the Government of Alberta for their generous support and approval of year one of Phase I of the *Lower Highwood Flood Mitigation Program*. Under this approval, Foothills County received an initial contribution of two million dollars to begin the process of offering buy-outs for properties with impacted residences. With these funds,

we were able to buy out the two most severely impacted properties. At that time, we had also submitted an application requesting the next installment of two million dollars for the 2019/2020 fiscal year in keeping with our understanding of what was contemplated as part of the previous approval for funding. We were disappointed to receive a letter from Minister Jason Nixon this past March indicating that there is no funding available at this time to continue the Lower Highwood program.

We understand that the current budget reflects a commitment to “responsible fiscal management” and that the COVID-19 pandemic has put significant additional strain on provincial funds. However, if the Government of Alberta fails to find funding for the Lower Highwood program, you will be abandoning an important responsibility to the landowners along the Highwood River. These landowners, through no choice of their own, are providing a valuable ecosystem service to the Town of High River by becoming part of the Town’s flood plain management strategy. We believe it is fundamentally unfair to expect Foothills County landowners to bear this cost of providing protection for the residents of High River.

The Government of Alberta made the decision to grant approvals for the mitigation works at High River with an understanding of the potential impacts to downstream landowners and so the Government of Alberta is ultimately responsible for increasing flood risk for these residents of Foothills County.

We urge you to re-consider making a commitment to fully funding the *Lower Highwood Flood Mitigation Program* in keeping with your government’s commitment to “*improve flood resilience by investing in community-level projects, upstream storage, healthy watersheds, flood mapping, river forecasting and emergency response and preparedness*” as stated in the ministry highlights on Budget 2019.

Respectfully yours,
FOOTHILLS COUNTY



Suzanne Oel
Reeve

Encl: Chronology - Foothills County Lower Highwood Mitigation Program

cc. Mr. Jason Nixon, Minister of Environment and Parks
Mr. Roger Reid, M.L.A, Livingstone-Macleod
Mr. R.J. Sigurdson M.L.A, Highwood
Ms. Miranda Rosin, M.L.A, Banff-Kananaskis
Mr. Mark Comerford, Alberta Environment and Parks

Chronology - Foothills County Lower Highwood Mitigation Program

(Current to June 18, 2020)

June 20, 2013: The Highwood River experienced an extreme flooding event.

2013-2014: The Government of Alberta purchased 24 properties deemed located in the Floodway on the Highwood River upstream from the Town of High River under the FDRP (Flood Damage Reduction Program). The property owners were paid assessed value for the properties.

December, 2014: Foothills County retained Worley Parsons Group to undertake modelling of the Highwood River. Worley was chosen because they had recently completed the *Highwood River Flood Management Master Plan (2010-2013)* for the Highwood River Advisory Committee. This plan had included developing a flood model for the portion of the Highwood in proximity to the Town of High River.

Spring 2015: Foothills, with the support of the Province, retained Advisian Worley Parsons Group and Amec Foster Wheeler to undertake the *Scoping Study of Flood Related Areas of Concern On the Highwood River and Little Bow River Within the Municipal District of Foothills (The Scoping Study)*. This work involved 2-D modelling and analysis in the Highwood River watershed. The objectives of this work were to:

- identify and describe flood related risks to M.D. residents and infrastructure;
- undertake a high level flood risk evaluation of the impacts of existing and proposed mitigation measures as well as natural flooding/erosion mechanisms;
- perform high level cost/benefit analysis on individual properties at risk; and
- propose mitigation options to address identified risks and protect M.D. of Foothills residents.

March 2015: The Government of Alberta released the Deltares report. This report was produced by a company from the Netherlands (Deltares) at the direction of the Province. In the report, Deltares recommended against any rebalancing of the flows between the Highwood and Little Bow River. The flow split between these rivers had been altered as a result of the mitigation constructed to protect the Town right after the flood. Subsequent to the construction of the mitigation, the Town of High River and Advisian Worley Parsons Group, had submitted a proposal to rebalance the flows to their previous condition, a proposal that had also been supported by Foothills County. The Government of Alberta officially accepted the results of the Deltares report and confirmed that flows in the Highwood would not be rebalanced, so the landowners downstream on the Highwood would see increased flows due to the mitigation constructed to protect the Town.

March 2016: Advisian and Amec Foster Wheeler submitted the completed Scoping Study to Foothills County.

May 2016: Foothills held two public open houses to inform landowners about the results of the *Scoping Study*. Approximately 120 landowners attended.

June, July, and September 2016: Foothills staff and members of Council held 53 individual meetings with impacted landowners in the Highwood River Watershed to discuss the results of the Scoping Study as they pertained to each of their specific properties.

October 2016: IBI Group was retained by the County with funding from the Province to undertake a *Benefit Cost Analysis of Flood Damage Reduction Alternatives / Landowner Damage Compensation Proposal*. This study was to focus on all properties along the Highwood River downstream from the Town that were predicted to be impacted by the mitigation constructed to protect the Town of High River and recommend a fair method of determining compensation for the increased flood risk they would face.

Nov 1, 2016: Foothills submitted a proposal to the Government of Alberta for *Highwood / Little Bow Flood Risk Mitigation Program*. This proposal included lands upstream from High River on the Highwood and downstream on the Highwood and Little Bow Rivers.

December 1, 2016: Foothills gave a presentation on the proposal for the *Highwood / Little Bow Flood Risk Mitigation Program* to representatives from Alberta Environment.

December 30, 2016: Foothills submitted supplemental information that had been requested by Alberta Environment with respect to the November 1, 2016 proposal to Alberta Environment.

January 25, 2017: Foothills sent a letter to landowners on the Highwood and Little Bow updating them on work that had been undertaken since the May 2016 public engagement event.

February 9, 2017: The Town of High River sent out a letter to County landowners in the area directly south of the Town likely to be impacted by the proposed Southwest Dike, to provide an update on Southwest Dike project.

June 7, 2017: Foothills submitted a letter to Andre Corbould, Deputy Minister, Environment and Parks to provide information on the November 2016 proposal for the Highwood/Little Bow program and ask for assistance moving it forward.

June 13, 2017: Foothills sent a letter to Mark Comerford, of the Watershed Adaptation and Resilience Branch of Alberta Environment indicating it had been over six months since we submitted a proposal and we had not yet received a written response or rebuttal to our proposal.

June 27, 2017: Foothills met with representatives from Watershed Adaptation and Resilience Branch of Alberta Environment. Once again, staff from Foothills provided a summary of November 2016 proposal and received direction for revisions. Foothills was told that at that time, the Province was only prepared to support a program for residents downstream of High River with residences that were predicted to be negatively impacted by the mitigation constructed to protect the Town. Provincial staff directed the County to put together a proposal based on this.

July 4, 2017: A letter was sent to Foothills County from Mark Comerford as follow up to the June 27 meeting. The letter outlines that the GoA is unable to support the proposal in its entirety but that they are supportive of the creation of a stand-alone funding proposal to facilitate mitigating or purchasing properties (whichever is the lower cost) with residences at high risk of flooding on the Highwood, downstream from the Town of High River. Mark also indicated that there was a potential under the FREC (Flood Recovery Erosion Control) program for mitigation for the highest priority properties on the

Little Bow because Provincial flood hazard mapping had not been undertaken in that area, resulting in them not being eligible for buyouts under the FDRP program in 2013.

July 10, 2017: Foothills sent a letter to landowners on the Highwood / Little Bow providing July 4, 2017 letter from Mark Comerford for their information.

August, 2017: Foothills received final *Mitigation and Compensation Study* from IBI Group.

September, 2017: Foothills Submitted the initial proposal for *the Lower Highwood Flood Risk Mitigation Program* to the Resilience and Mitigation Branch of Alberta Environment.

October 2, 2017: Foothills met with representatives from the Resilience and Mitigation Branch regarding the proposal submitted in September. Provincial representatives gave direction for revisions that they wanted to see made to the proposal. One of these was a change to the prioritization of properties. The prioritized list was to be based on the amount of additional water that was predicted to be seen at the residence due to the mitigation constructed to protect the Town. Previously, the prioritization was based on the total predicted depth of water at the residence in a 2013 equivalent event.

January, 2018: Foothills Submitted a revised proposal for the *Lower Highwood Flood Risk Mitigation Program* to the Resilience and Mitigation Branch of Alberta Environment.

March 5, 2018: Foothills sent a letter to eligible landowners on the Little Bow River informing them that the Province had allowed the County to redirect unused money that had been allotted for flood recovery in the County to facilitate buy-outs of the properties most at risk on the Little Bow River. As funding was limited, the County would only be able to make offers to the developed properties that were predicted to see the highest level of flood waters. Two properties were subsequently purchased by the County in the fall of 2018.

June 8, 2018: Foothills sent a letter to Eric Denhoff, Deputy Minister, Environment and Parks, providing background on the proposals previously submitted to the Province and asking for assistance to move things forward.

Summer 2018: At Foothills County's request, the Town of High River agreed to send a letter to Eric Denhoff indicating support for the proposed *Lower Highwood Flood Risk Mitigation Program*, to address impacts of the work that had been done to protect the Town.

September 19, 2018: Foothills sent a letter to Minister Shannon Phillips, Minister of Environment and Parks, providing background on the situation on the Lower Highwood and asking for support for the January 2018 proposal for the *Lower Highwood Flood Risk Mitigation Program*.

December 3, 2018: Foothills sent a letter to Rick Blackwood, Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategy Division, Environment and Parks, indicating that we feel it is time to revisit the progress that has been made on the proposed Lower Highwood program and requesting a meeting as soon as possible.

Throughout 2018: The Town of High River purchased 3 properties in Foothills County on the south side of High River as part of their South West Dike project. Paid a market appraisal amount.

Q1 and Q2, 2019: The Town of High River has made offers to 6 property owners to purchase easements across their lands which would allow the lands to be flooded in extreme flood events.

March 20, 2019: Foothills County received an executed grant agreement from the Government of Alberta for \$2,000,000 to initiate implementation of Phase 1 of the *Lower Highwood Flood Risk Mitigation Program*.

May-Oct, 2019: Foothills County purchased properties #1 and #2 from the prioritized list of properties on the Lower Highwood negatively impacted by the mitigation constructed to protect the Town of High River.

June 2019: Foothills sent a letter to Minister Jason Nixon, Minister of Environment and Parks, thanking the Government of Alberta for their generous support and approval of year 1 of Phase 1 of the Lower Highwood Flood Mitigation Program. Foothills included a request and application for a \$2 million installment for the 2019/2020 fiscal year in keeping with Foothills County's understanding of the previous year's approval for funding.

November, 2019: Foothills sent a letter sent to Minister Jason Nixon, Minister of Environment and Parks, following up on the June 2019 funding application for an installment of \$2 million for the 2019/2020 fiscal year. Foothills urged the Minister to consider making a commitment to fully funding the Lower Highwood Flood Mitigation Program and requested a response from the government.

March, 2020: A response was received from Minister Jason Nixon, Minister of Environment and Parks, indicating that the Government is in a period of financial restraint and there is no available funding for Foothills County's request at this time. Foothills was urged to continue working with Mark Comerford, Director of Resilience Projects.

March 25, 2020: Foothills County approved a motion to acknowledge the letter from Minister Jason Nixon and direct administration to prepare a letter to be sent to the Premier, Jason Nixon, Minister of Environment and Parks, Roger Reid, MLA Livingstone-Macleod, R.J. Sigurdson, MLA Highwood, and Miranda Rosin, MLA Banff-Kananaskis.