

## A Team Effort to Prevent Flooding in Southside Virginia

*Statewide and Regional Collaboration Push Forward with Improvements*

**South Boston, VA** – Running through the town of South Boston is the intersection of US Route 501 and US Route 58, one of the busiest roads in southern Virginia, connecting the container shipments coming into the Port of Virginia in Norfolk with interstates that lead all over the country. This is a major economic contributor to Southside cities like Danville, Martinsville, and the towns of South Boston and Halifax.

But sometimes, that road is underwater.

For days at a time.

Sometimes, **weeks.**



Multiple times in the past few years, the four-lane highway is completely submerged under floodwater from torrential rains and the overflow from the nearby Dan River, which flows more than 200 miles, from Patrick County in southwestern Virginia, through North Carolina, back into southern Virginia. The Riverdale section of South Boston is nearby, and floodwaters have crested into it, leaving many feet of water that recede slowly.

The economic impact for businesses includes being forced to close for days at a time while waiting for the water to recede, with lost revenue and damage to products and projects on-site. Once the waters recede, business still cannot resume immediately.

When they arrive, there is debris clean-up work to begin, outside the business on the grounds and in the parking lot. There are items inside the store or workspace that also need to dry out, including floors and rugs, products and tools. All of this also causes a great deal of inconvenience to business owners, but also their customers. It also prompts business owners who can't easily move their premises to consider leaving town for less flood-prone areas.

There are also longer-reaching effects: flooding on Route 58 delays people living south of town from getting to the regional hospital located just north of it, including emergency medical responders transporting patients.

South Boston Town Manager Tom Raab knows that flooding has been a problem there historically, and that it may never be completely solved.

“We have to be proactive in coming up with solutions. Even if it's not going to stop all the flooding, as a locality we have to help keep our people safe – we're aiming to mitigate the damage to businesses and the danger to people the best we can,” he said.



Photo credit, right: The Gazette Virginian

Developing creative flood mitigation and planning strategies isn't something communities always have the means or the technical background to do. So when The Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service's Center for Economic and Policy Studies (CEPS) proposed a project that could help make the district more resilient to flooding, the Southside Planning District Commission (which serves the counties of Halifax, Mecklenburg and Brunswick and the towns of South Boston and South Hill) joined the effort.

Town Manager Raab is happy for the regional collaboration.

“We have had so much flooding in the past decade that it has become a repeat situation. We have to do our best to persist and be creative about how we handle this,” he said.

The town was awarded a grant to create a floodplain and offer relocation to businesses that have been most affected, but they’ve also joined the Southside Planning District in partnering with the University of Virginia’s newly formed public service program, the Community Flood Resilience Initiative. The team’s idea is to help underserved localities meet the challenges of more frequent and extreme flooding events.

“We aim to provide critically needed assistance to vulnerable communities across Virginia through developing partnerships and working closely with localities. We’re excited to work with the Southside and LENOWISCO planning districts as the initiative’s first partners,” CEPS’ William Shobe said. “Through UVA, we have economists, urban planners, data scientists and engineers with diverse skills, from risk analysis to hydrology to environmental planning – expertise many communities can’t afford in-house.”

The state’s urban coastal regions have long been the focus of efforts to combat the effects of climate change but far less attention has been paid to rural inland localities, which have fewer resources to dedicate to flood preparedness. The Community Flood Preparedness Fund legislation addresses this gap by reserving 25% of the fund for low-income geographic areas, and includes money for “capacity-building and planning.”

Funding for both projects will be through grants to the respective planning district commissions from the Virginia Community Flood Preparedness fund, created by the Virginia General Assembly in 2020. The fund includes money to build flood mitigation projects, but to apply for those grants, localities are required to have flood resilience plans in place. Under the two grants, the work will include a flood risk analysis based on current and near-future climate conditions for each district, including the effects of past flooding, what localities know now, what they need to know for effective flood planning and how to engage everyone who has a stake in the process to ensure diverse voices of the community are heard.

By August 2022, the team will hand the planning district commissions a roadmap and timeline to develop an approvable resilience plan. Producing the roadmaps to resilience plans is just the first of four phases the UVA teams hopes to complete with the Southside districts, and will include developing plans and studies to support implementation and then the executive of the prevention and protection projects. Another similar project is underway with the LENOWISCO PDC.

The goal is to combine the needed expertise with community leaders to make a plan for managing risks and preventing flood events from harming the health, safety and livelihoods of citizens in areas affected by flooding in central Virginia.

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