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11 years after, company wants to develop Spring Creek flood site

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Eleven years after the devastating Spring Creek flood, an Alabama-based developer is proposing a potential 700-bed apartment building on the site where four people died in the 1997 calamity.

The project's developers say they are committed to honoring the memory of the people who died on the 10-acre site, a former mobile-home park near the corner of College Avenue and Prospect Street, along the Mason Street corridor.

The July 28-29 flood killed five people after a massive rainstorm dumped huge amounts of rain on the west side of Fort Collins.

City planners are mindful of the site's history but hope to move on with a major project that could help boost the Mason Corridor. The land, which once was the site of two mobile-home parks, sits vacant today.

"Clearly we'll be evaluating the project with the utmost of care," said Cameron Gloss, the city's director of current planning. "This is a significant opportunity site for the city and for the community and the Mason Corridor."

In 1997, after two days of rain, floodwater flowing at more than twice the peak runoff of the Poudre River created a lake in the 40-acre detention area just west of an embankment holding the Burlington Northern & Santa Fe railroad line that parallels College Avenue.

The water topped the 19-foot-tall embankment and blew out a 12-by-14 foot culvert that was plugged with compacted dirt as part of a 1990 flood-control program.

The sudden rush of water - levels rose 5½ feet in three minutes - flooded the mobile-home parks within minutes, catching residents by surprise and lifting homes off their foundations. Cars tumbled like toys in the surge of water.

Five people died that night - JoAnn Roth, Rose Marie Rodriguez, Estefana Guarneros, Sarah Payne and Cindy Schulz. Four of the five lived in the mobile-home parks.

Brian Varrella, today the city's floodplain administrator, was a 21-year-old city intern and CSU civil engineering student when the flood hit. He said lessons learned from the flood spurred him to seek the position he holds today.

"The history of this site has not been forgotten. Protecting life, safety and property are our No. 1 priority. The development team is aware of the site, seen the monument, the high water mark," Varrella said.

Varrella said the Spring Creek flooded his then-basement with two feet of water mixed with

sewage.

"What I really took from the flood was people helping people. I thought how much better we could do if we could plan for this sort of thing. I really wanted to become a part of that," he said. "The best way to prepare for a flood is to be ready for it in the first place."

To that end, buildings on the site will have to be built on foundations sitting at least 18 inches above the flood plain, as defined by federal flood experts. The company proposing the project, Capstone Development Corp., is planning both apartment buildings and retail development on the site.

Under city law, the development must also not "push" floodwaters onto another property. That means creating systems to funnel away water should it flood the site.

Capstone representatives say they are committed to working with the city to develop the site safely.

"We're well aware of the history of the site. We would not be pursuing development on this site if we did not believe this was a site that was safe to build on," said Jeff Jones, executive vice president of Capstone.

He added: "We are going to design the site and the community to further protect them from rising water should a 100-year flood occur in the future."

Jones said Capstone and the city are working together to explore possible memorial options.

Capstone hopes to have the project complete two years from now.
