

# Idea of dam has flood-prone communities along Rahway River gushing

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By [Ryan Hutchins/The Star-Ledger](#)

**UNION COUNTY** — For the communities along the Rahway River, the ones that were swamped by Tropical Storm Irene's relentless downpour, any plan that would ease flooding is a welcome one.

But when leaders of those towns hear that one specific flood-control measure could reduce water levels all along the river, by as much as several feet in some places, folks are down right giddy.

That's what has been happening in recent months. The measure would entail a dry detention dam at the South Mountain Reservation in Essex County. It wouldn't permanently obstruct the flow of water. Rather, it would hold some back in the case of a major rain. The water would be released slowly in the days after a storm.

A preliminary analysis by the Army Corps of Engineers found that such a dam could reduce flooding by about 3 feet in Millburn and around a foot and a half in Cranford.

"It really does seem to be a very, very promising solution to, really, a whole lot of trauma downstream, especially in Cranford," said David Robinson, that township's mayor.

**Hundreds of homes in Cranford sustained severe damage** after Irene. People canoed down major roads. The first floor of the township's municipal building flooded, and it's still closed today.

Many other towns along the river experienced their own flooding, some hit harder than others. All told, the damage totaled tens of millions of dollars.

As those communities have worked to recover, the Army Corps of Engineers — working with the state Department of Environmental Protection — has been examining potential flood control measures that could help Cranford and Rahway.

The project got started in 2007, but its importance appeared ever more acute after Irene. With that in mind, a group of mayors searching for ways to ease flooding asked the Army Corps of Engineers to examine what impact the dry dam idea would have.

The analysis is very basic and preliminary, but its findings are promising. By building a detention system that's 70 feet tall and 890 feet long, water flow in Cranford could be reduced by 26 percent during a 100-year storm.

"It shows a couple of feet of water surface reduction in the communities downstream," said Rifat Salim, the project manager for the Army Corps of Engineers. "I think that's why there's local interest."

The dry dam is one of many alternatives the Army Corps of Engineers is exploring for flood reduction. Engineers have examined the potential impact of changing levees, flood walls and storage basins. The dry detention dam, which would be placed in Orange, may be the best alternative, but it's simply too early for the engineers to make such a call, Salim said.

"We have a process," she said. "We have to evaluate all the alternatives."

That process takes years.

But members of the Mayors Council on Rahway River Watershed Flood Control, formed after Irene, do not want to wait. They see a viable solution that can help many people on a regional level, and they want to pursue it now.

"The way they get funded, they really wouldn't start anything until 2015," Union Township Mayor Joseph Florio said. "With the mayors, we want to see if we can move ahead."

The group is working on an interlocal agreement to have each town contribute \$5,000 for a legal analysis. Seven local governments would be involved, according to Dan Aschenbach, a former mayor of Cranford and an active member of the group. The council, he said, is also pursuing \$350,000 in state funding for an environmental assessment and preliminary design.

"That will help to assure Essex County of any type of impacts it will have on any of its properties," he said.

Much of the area in which the dam would need to be built is on county-owned land inside the reservation. Essex County Executive Joseph N. DiVincenzo Jr. said he is very open to the idea, but many things need to be determined first.

"Before any final decision is made, there is still a great deal of work, surveys and studies that have to be done, and we must make sure the environment, reservation habitats and our various park facilities, including Turtle Back Zoo and Codey Arena, are not sacrificed or placed in harm's way," he said in a statement.

But it's unclear when or if the state will fund an environmental study, as the mayors are hoping. The state budget was passed without any funds for the project, and the DEP said it had received no request for the money. The DEP is funding 50 percent of the Army Corps' work along the Rahway River.

Analysis done independent of the Army Corps of Engineers' process also wouldn't speed things up — at least as long as federal funding is needed to build the dam, which would cost millions of dollars. It would be the first dam structure built in New Jersey since 1986.

Nonetheless, the local officials are eager to get moving. They saw the damage Irene did, and they know what big storms have done, and they're convinced this is the best way to go. But they want to know sooner rather than later if it's really possible.

"The feeling is, if this can be done and accomplished, this will do more than any of the other things people are trying to do to help communities along the river," Florio said. "It's going to come down to dollars and cents."