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# News Release

## **THE SHOW MUST GO ON: MITIGATION MEASURES PAY OFF FOR YOUTH THEATER**

**BRATTLEBORO, Vt.** – When Tropical Storm Irene came barreling up the East Coast in August, the managing director of the New England Youth Theater in Brattleboro, Michelle Meima, was in Washington, DC.

“Rick Barron, our technical director, and Jerry Stockman, our lighting director called me and said, ‘There’s a storm coming. We’d better put up the flood gates.’ My reaction was, ‘Is it really going to be that bad?’” Meima recalled. “They said yes, but nobody thought it would be as bad as it was.”

That simple step – deploying perhaps the most low-tech and cheapest of the flood-mitigation measures installed as part of the theater’s renovation – turned out to be invaluable.

On August 28, the adjacent Whetstone Brook jumped its banks and flooded a broad swath of the low-lying Flat Street area where the New England Youth Theater is located. Nearly two feet of water surged all around the building and those surrounding it.

But thanks to the 20-inch high aluminum panels set across its five doorways, the refurbished industrial space – built in 1982 by Tri State Automotive to expand its machine shop operation – withstood the deluge with only a small amount of water on its floor, caused by the wicking through its carpets.

While other businesses in the area were devastated, the staff and parents of the roughly 300 youths who belong to the theater were able to tear out the carpets and clean up the silt mostly on their own, and within a week the theater was hosting classes and performances.

Meima expects the \$5,000 carpet replacement and some other losses will be picked up by the non-profit’s flood insurance.

“This is why FEMA offers financial assistance for flood mitigation projects,” said Angela Magara, FEMA’s Hazard Mitigation Branch Director. “It’s much less expensive to avoid damage from a flood or other disaster than to repair it afterwards.”

It was the requirements of the town's flood plain ordinance – in conjunction with its membership in the National Flood Insurance Program – that prompted the NEYT to install flood mitigation measures after it purchased the former Tri-State Automotive warehouse and several adjacent buildings in 2006.

The theater was founded in 1998 by Stockman and Stephen Sterns, and produced its first show at Landmark College in nearby Putney, Vt. the next year. Months later, it eventually landed at the site of a former restaurant attached to the historic Latchis Theater complex in downtown Brattleboro, a town of just over 12,000 people.

Purchasing the former Tri State Automotive campus – which includes the building that houses the theater as well as several historical buildings adjacent to it – the NEYT embarked on an ambitious plan to make the new theater the centerpiece of an arts center that would also include a music venue.

As the group planned its renovations of the newest of the buildings, including the stage, a new lobby, concession area, and restrooms, their architect, Chip Greenberg from Greenberg Associates, specified several mitigation measures to comply with the town's flood plain rules, including:

- Adding a 6-inch reinforced concrete slab and two inches of rigid foam over the existing 5-inch slab floor to resist hydrostatic pressure;
- Elevating the heating, ventilating, and air conditioning equipment and electrical feeds as well as anchoring the fuel tank;
- Flood-proofing the sewer and water systems;
- Installing a sump pump, backflow preventors and gate valves.

In addition, several tons of concrete were poured into and around the “nose” of the building which faced Whetstone Brook, both to armor and anchor the structure, and the floodgates installed.

“We did the flood-proofing design for the building to meet the FEMA dry flood-proofing requirements,” said Robert Stevens, president of Brattleboro-based Stevens and Associates engineering. “It was a retrofit, so we benefited from having a reasonably sound structure to begin with.”

The fact that other nearby buildings were heavily flooded, and some had their foundations undermined, is a testament not only to the design but the skill of the contractors in executing it, he said.

“It held up quite well,” Stevens said. “And that’s what it’s supposed to do, if it’s designed to meet these inundation and flow rate levels.”

“We really didn’t spend a lot of money on the protection,” said Barron, who at the time of the renovation project was the chairman of the theater’s board of directors. He estimated the measures were roughly \$75,000 out of the \$1.5 million project cost.

“It was a good investment,” Barron said.

To learn more about hazard mitigation, visit: <http://vem.vermont.gov/> or [www.fema.gov/government/mitigation](http://www.fema.gov/government/mitigation)

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