Corridor Rising
A decade of reinvestment following the 2008 floods

CORALVILLE
Coralville

The flood’s next stop was Coralville. For weeks, the region had experienced bursts of flash flooding mixed with afternoons of sunshine, during which residents sand-bagged. Thousands of volunteers filled and placed more than 6 million sandbags along the Iowa River in Johnson County. Most sandbag walls were built to the 1993 flood elevation, at 28.52 feet. The river, however, crested at 31.53 feet on June 15.

Residents and business owners in Coralville spent the week of June 9 anxiously checking weather reports and updates from the Army Corps of Engineers and local news stations. Flood predictions changed frequently. Although the spillway over-

Volunteers fill sandbags and build walls around important infrastructure during the days leading up to the flooding of 2008 (City of Coralville).
flowed on Tuesday, June 10, a string of sun-filled afternoons had been reassuring. It came as a surprise when National Guard soldiers left mandatory evacuation notices on homes and businesses along the city’s busiest business district and nearby neighborhoods.

Soon, the river began to noticeably rise by the hour, flowing into parking lots. It became a last-minute scramble to protect keepsakes in homes and inventory in businesses. Expecting no more than a few inches of water, chairs were put on tables, power cords were unplugged and if possible, appliances and equipment were elevated.

The storms returned in earnest. Days were filled with rain and nights were filled with thunder and lightning. By Thursday, June 12, water reduced traffic lanes on Highway 6, Coralville’s busiest thoroughfare. On Friday, June 13, it was clear the flood was staggeringly more intense than expected. Residents were advised to leave the region, if possible, as roads were quickly being overtaken by the river.

Throughout eastern Iowa, roads were closed in every direction. Detours diverted drivers – hours and at times, hundreds of miles – off course. Even in the Coralville/
Iowa City area, roads were difficult to navigate. So many streets were flooded and closed between the two cities, some residents were unable to travel to work, grocery stores and other locations.

At Interstate 80 and First Avenue, known as the Iowa River Landing District, the river rose to the steps of the Coralville Marriott Hotel and Conference Center, built just two years earlier. The hotel was unharmed, but the homes between the hotel and the river were inundated. No one was injured, although most of the properties were severely damaged.

The city of Coralville later invested in several home buyouts in the district. That land is now greenspace to help dissipate future flooding and the city has built an earthen berm with a trail along the river. The 180-acre Iowa River Landing District has been booming ever since, and is now home to Trader Joe's, Von Maur, J. Jill, Lululemon, a major medical clinic, upscale apartments, another modern hotel and restaurants. Future plans for the district include a $46 million arena, as well as additional medical clinics, stores and restaurants.

Back in 2008, floodwaters advanced past the Iowa River Landing District, swelling over the riverbanks into businesses and across roads at the landmark Iowa River Power Restaurant.

Just south of the IRP, the river meets up with Clear Creek. At this spot, trees and debris picked up by the river slammed into an essential railroad bridge and road. The resulting bottleneck increased flooding in the area.

Water levels rose at an alarming rate along Clear and Biscuit creeks, filling businesses and apartment buildings with as much as 9 feet of water. Roads were impassable. Floodwaters were so high, the nearby First Avenue/Highway 6 intersection – the busiest in the county – was under water for 10 days.

Along the Iowa River and city creeks, 200 businesses were damaged or destroyed, from Mekong Asian Restaurant to Wig and Pen, home of the Flying Tomato pizza.

Mekong, which had been flooded in 1993, did not return to its Coralville location after the 2008 event. The business instead reopened in Iowa City, building it into a successful restaurant before the owners retired in 2016.
The flooding headed west along the Coralville Strip, inundating restaurant chains like Hardee’s, Taco John’s and Lone Star Steakhouse. Hardee’s demolished its restaurant at the busy intersection of Highway 6 and First Avenue. Franchise owner Lee Staak decided to elevate the property and rebuild. Next door, Dave Sondag’s barber shop was submerged with 4 feet of water. While it was being gutted and rebuilt, Sondag cut hair in his garage. He later returned to the building where he worked until he retired in 2012. Lone Star Steakhouse did not reopen.

The river crossed Highway 6, making it impassable, and decimated Frohwein Office Plus, a fourth-generation, family-owned company. Its showroom and inventory of office furniture and supplies were destroyed. The company was able to recover, however, and has since expanded and merged with Pioneer Workspace Solutions to become Tallgrass Business Resources.

On the east side of First Avenue, south of Iowa River Power Restaurant, was Taco Bell. The fast food chain was next to the juncture of the Iowa River, Clear Creek and CRANDIC railroad bridge and filled with several feet of water. The building was demolished, and several flood mitigation measures were added to the property. A very

“THINGS ARE GOING TO CONTINUE TO IMPROVE. BOTH IOWA CITY AND CORALVILLE ARE REALLY LOOKING AT THE RIVER AND WHAT WE CAN DO ALONG THE RIVERFRONT,” SAID KELLY HAYWORTH, CITY ADMINISTRATOR, CITY OF CORALVILLE.
busy Panera Bread is now located on the property. Taco Bell has since relocated.

The flood overtook the railroad bridge and embankment, which served as berm protecting the surrounding businesses. Water entered several businesses in a strip mall next door, filling them up to 9 feet. It went on to fill Peking Buffet and Old Chicago with 6 feet of water. Old Chicago owner Joe McLaughlin later lamented spending time sandbagging when, he said, time would have been better spent evacuating equipment and furniture. Peking Buffet demolished its building and reopened three years later after elevating its property. A few doors east, the Vine Tavern & Eatery took on 4 feet of water and reopened a few months later.

Wig and Pen owner Dick Querry decided to rebuild after the restaurant filled with nearly 7 feet of water. The business spent several months gutting and renovating, and on FEMA’s insistence, built a permanent floodwall around the building. Since the flood, Wig and Pen has expanded and recently opened a fourth location in North Liberty.

Across the street, floral shop Every Bloomin’ Thing filled with 4 feet of water. Before the flood, mother-daughter team Sanja Hunt and Maja Hunt moved as many flowers, vases and other equipment as they could out of the building. Each day, the river moved ominously closer as it crept along Rocky Shore Drive. The
flood destroyed more than expected and it took months to rebuild and reopen. But the Hunts returned with their own clever flood mitigation measures. After gutting their building, they installed concrete flooring, and all the tables and workspaces are on wheels. If floodwater reaches their building again, they will be able to make a hasty escape. Wiring for electrical and phone systems was elevated, as well.

Along the way, water pushed through countless other businesses, including Coral Lanes bowling alley, a furniture store, scrapbooking store, hotel, church, auto body shop, a major copy and printing business and more. For some, it was a six-figure loss. A few were near retirement and chose not to reopen. A year later, 50 percent of the impacted businesses still had not reopened.

“A YEAR AFTER THE FLOOD, ONLY 50 PERCENT OF BUSINESSES HAD RETURNED. THAT’S WHY WE’VE DONE SO MUCH WITH FLOOD PROTECTION, SO THEY NEVER HAVE TO GO THROUGH THAT AGAIN,” SAID ELLEN HABEL, ASSISTANT CITY ADMINISTRATOR, CITY OF CORALVILLE.