

# Ventnor homeowners rebuild with RREM funding

By **CHRISTIE ROTONDO**, Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, April 12, 2015 11:05 pm

VENTNOR — Jack and Audrey Knorr watched their neighbor's home on North Oxford Avenue rise about 7 feet during the winter.

The home is one of a handful on the Ventnor Heights street that have been lifted to meet new base flood elevation standards, and the Knorrs hope their house — a single-family they've shared for more than 40 years — will be next to go up.

The waiting, they said, has been the most frustrating part of the process.

A.C. Revel casino fines begin

“The thoughts of what we've been through, going through the storm and then going through the rebuilding,” Jack Knorr said.

“And then having to do it all over again,” Audrey added.

The Knorrs are among about 7,000 homeowners in New Jersey who were awarded funds through the state's Reconstruction, Rehabilitation, Elevation and Mitigation, or RREM, program to raise their homes and become compliant with new base flood elevation standards.

Now, as more than \$819 million in federal funding the RREM program awarded to homeowners flows into the state's shore communities, more homes are being raised. Lisa Ryan, a spokeswoman with the state Department of Community Affairs, said 800 homes have been raised through the program — 500 in the past four months alone.

“Ventnor Heights is actually a very small portion of our business,” said Andrew Baumgardner, who owns Baumgardner House Lifting in Egg Harbor Township. “If you can imagine entire towns looking like that, construction trucks on every street, that's the way the entire Jersey Shore is looking north of Margate.”

The boom, Baumgardner said, is attributable to the RREM funding now making its way into the hands of homeowners. Of the \$22.3 million in funding awarded to Ventnor homeowners, about \$8.09 million has been disbursed, according to data from the state Department of Community Affairs.

“We're right in the thick of things, and it's only going to get thicker,” Baumgardner said. To keep up



## RAISING HOMES

Jack and Audrey Knorr await the raising of their Ventnor Heights home, Wednesday April 8, 2015, following new insurance rules post Hurricane Sandy.

with demand and streamline the process, his company now handles masonry and carpentry in-house. Two years ago, he had eight employees. Now, he has 40.

### A.C. Mayor wants to close budget gap

While homes are being raised all over the state, Baumgardner said that contractors, and homeowners, have faced several headaches. Changing regulations from the state and municipalities, as well as two consecutive harsh winters, have caused several delays. The entire raising process should only last about 90 days, and homeowners have a year to raise their homes after the grant money is dispersed.

“I’ve seen houses that were lifted in the fall that are still up in the air,” said Rich Stevens, Brigantine’s construction official. He said there are 225 homes in Brigantine that have been raised or are in the midst of being elevated. Since Hurricane Sandy, his office has issued 3,047 construction permits, and Stevens estimates that about 85 percent of the work done is storm-related.

To keep up with the boom, Brigantine’s construction office had to close its service window on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons.

“We had so many people coming to window, we couldn’t finish the permitting,” he said.

While there have been delays for many homeowners, Ryan said the progress the state is making now through the RREM program is a result of efforts made to simplify the process. Participants can now mail-in documents and work remotely with a housing advisor, and select their own contractor to complete the work. The DCA has held 14 information sessions on the RREM program throughout the state to answer individual questions from homeowners — some drawing a crowd of more than 900 people.

While \$819 million in federal funding has been awarded through the program, a total of \$1.1 billion has been invested in rebuilding and elevating primary homes. An additional \$255 million could be coming into the program this year, following federal approval of a third round of disaster recovery funds.

Anita Messina, a homeowner in Ocean City, was packing up some of her belongings this week as construction on her 1950s home was expected to begin by the end of the month. After her home was damaged in Sandy, she said she applied for almost every grant the state offered, and was surprised when she received a \$150,000 RREM grant in June to raise her home.

When Messina saw that so many others were still displaced from Sandy, she said, she was actually surprised the process has moved along so smoothly.

“Around the corner there are three split-levels up in the air,” she said. “You can just see the grant money is coming in and now things are moving, and they seem to be moving kind of quickly.”

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