Streamlined Floodway Map Amendments: A Phased, SUDS-Integrated Framework for Cost-Effective Floodplain Development in Puerto Rico and Beyond

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Abstract

Civil engineers routinely avoid floodway projects due to prohibitive upfront H&H study costs, FEMA criteria, drawn-out agency reviews, and liability risks. This paper introduces a phased, decision-support framework, tested on a 4.11-cuerda site at Guayanilla River's entrance (post-Hurricane María, 2017), that transforms uncertainty into a predictable service offering:

- Rapid Eligibility Screening
- Scaled Hydrologic and Hydraulic Modeling
- Early Targeted Agency Engagement
- Modular Submittals & Deliverables
- Transparent Client Decision Tools
- Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS) Integration

By directly addressing the core pain points—study cost, approval uncertainty, multi-agency complexity, and liability—this guide empowers engineers to deliver resilient, financially viable floodplain developments. While tailored for Puerto Rico's floodway regulations, the framework and SUDS strategies are fully transferable to any FEMA-regulated floodplain or floodway project across the United States.

Introduction

When a civil engineer is tasked with evaluating a property for development, the challenge extends beyond determining whether construction is physically possible. A thorough assessment must consider the project's economic feasibility, regulatory constraints, and the site's long-term sustainability, especially in flood-prone areas (Saffana et al., 2024a; Shah et al., 2017). In Puerto Rico (PR), where mountainous terrain funnels water into interconnected basins, rivers like the Guayanilla River carry significant hydrodynamic forces from higher elevations to low-lying lands (Pike, 2006). This dynamic creates a challenging environment for construction, requiring engineers to analyze soil stability, flood risk, and mitigation strategies before breaking ground.

Hurricane María in 2017 demonstrated the unpredictable nature of extreme weather events, bringing destructive winds and prolonged rainfall that overwhelmed drainage systems and reshaped floodplain boundaries (Li et al., 2022). The aftermath revealed the vulnerabilities of existing infrastructure and reinforced the importance of site-specific evaluations in construction planning. Many projects that initially seemed viable became financially and structurally unfeasible due to unforeseen costs in flood mitigation and insurance requirements.

Problem

The Guayanilla site faces substantial development challenges due to its proximity to the river, floodplain exposure (Floodway), and limited drainage infrastructure. Post-Hurricane María modifications have increased flood risks and erosion, while outdated FEMA maps and complex permitting requirements add uncertainty. These vulnerabilities highlight the need for complete technical considerations, including groundwater paths and careful planning to confirm that any proposed development is both safe and economically feasible.

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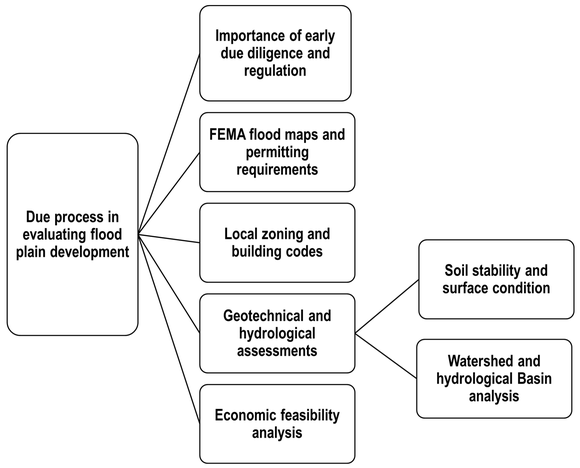
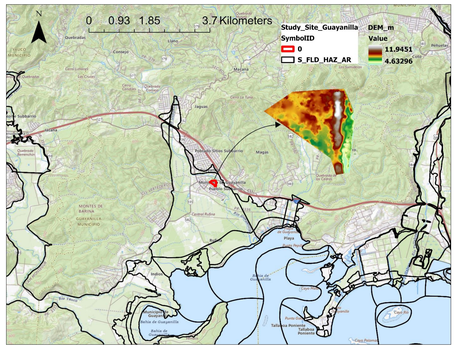
Methodology



Study Site

- The study site is Guayanilla, PR, covering 4.11 acres within a100-year floodway with an average elevation of 8.47m and a BFE of 10m.
- Sea level rise and increasingly intense tropical storms due to climate change heighten the site's vulnerability.
- Hurricane Maria (2017) a category 4 storm , caused $90 billion in infrastructure damage across Puerto Rico from extreme rainfall, flooding, and wind.
- The site faces major challenges including erosion, flood exposure, outdated FEMA maps, and inadequate drainage infrastructure.
- Comprehensive planning and technical assessments are essential to ensure safe and economically viable development.



Results and Discussion

Economic Feasibility Analysis

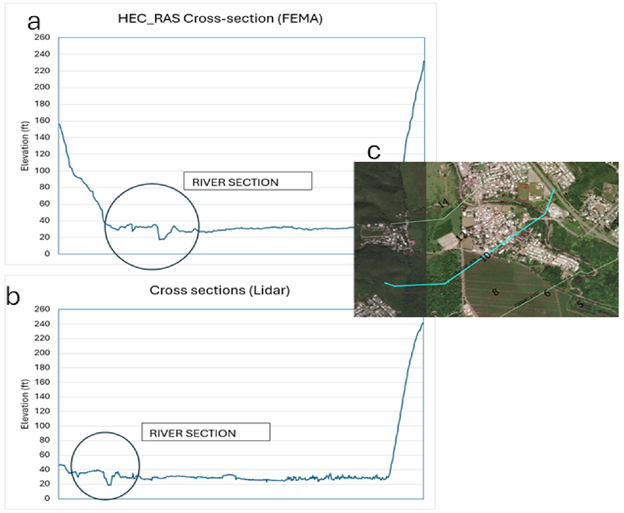
Engineers must assess the financial viability of floodplain developments by analyzing both direct and indirect costs, including mitigation measures, specialized studies, and regulatory compliance. This helps clients determine if a project is worth pursuing and how to do so cost-effectively and resiliently.

Design and mitigation strategies in floodplain development

Floodplain development requires innovative, site-specific mitigation strategies that address both environmental risks and economic limits. Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS) like bioswales, green roofs, and permeable pavements help manage stormwater and reduce flood risks. Elevating structures, using flood-resistant materials, and breakaway foundations help minimize flood damage. Adaptive planning, including real-time monitoring flexible layouts, enhances resilience to future climate variability. Early collaboration with planners and agencies enables integrated solutions like dual-purpose green spaces for recreation and flood mitigation.

Site specific requirements

- Development in Guayanilla, PR requires approval from the Puerto Rico planning board through a special procedure.
- The site must be elevated by 10-11 meters, but landfill use is not permitted.
- A mandatory Hydrological and Hydraulic (H&H) study must be conducted early in the process.
- The administration prefers commercial developments in floodway areas, as they are less occupied during extreme weather events.



Conclusions

Floodplain development presents a complex intersection of environmental risk, engineering challenge, and regulatory oversight. As demonstrated through the case study of the Guayanilla property, successful project planning in these areas requires civil engineers to engage in comprehensive due diligence, ranging from geotechnical and hydrologic assessments to regulatory navigation and economic analysis. Hurricane María's legacy has underscored the need for updated flood modeling, adaptive design strategies, and a proactive approach to risk management. FEMA flood maps and models were updated for the site in 2018.

By integrating technical expertise with regulatory awareness and financial foresight, civil engineers can offer practical, forward-thinking solutions that are more efficient and safer. Whether through innovative stormwater management systems, resilient construction techniques, or informed client guidance, engineers have the tools to make floodplain development not only possible but also viable. In regions vulnerable to climate-driven events, this integrated approach is essential to building communities that can endure and adapt. This updated regulatory framework reassesses the property's development limitations, potentially reduces insurance premium costs, and supports the design of tailored flood-resistant mitigation systems. In this way, the technical engineering challenges are intrinsically linked to and remedied through proactive regulatory engagement, ensuring that the project is both safe and compliant with federal standards.

Future Work

Future work will be the development of Hydrological and Hydraulic models for the whole watershed based on available Lidar data. HEC HMS will be used for the hydrology and HEC RAS will be used for the hydraulic modeling framework.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Christian Villalta for his continuous support throughout this work.

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