“It was time to try something else. After struggling with how to choose the best course of action we decided to demolish the old home and build high above the flood.”

Winding River Drive, a little up-river from the Borough of Sayre, is one of the most beautiful places in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. It’s a remote paradise, with views across the Susquehanna River to a steep, forested hillside. But the tiny community has learned that their river can be far more than challenging.

Robin and Garry Smith love their location on the river, but their determination to stay was tested over the years by four floods that caused moderate to severe damage to their home. As Robin put it, “It was time to try something else. After struggling with how to choose the best course of action we decided to demolish the old home and build high above the flood.”

Local regulations require new homes to be constructed with a margin of safety. Thus, the lowest floor level must be at least 18” above the Base Flood Elevation (BFE), which is the
flood level with a predicted one-percent chance of occurring during a twelve month period, as indicated on the current floodplain map. The Smiths decided to build a foundation that would exceed the minimum requirement. They had watched with dismay as rain from 2006 Hurricane Ivan caused the river to rise nearly 20” above the BFE.

It’s extremely fortunate that the Smiths decided to utilize the space under their new home for parking. It’s mostly for this reason that the house is perched six feet above the required level and, therefore, eight feet above ground. When 2011 Tropical Storm Lee brought the river to a record breaking level, they realized the extra elevation had saved their home. When flood warnings were broadcast, the Smiths opened their garage doors at both ends of the house to allow the powerful water to flow safely through. Happily, there was no damage from scouring and undermining of the house, since the new foundation extended four feet below ground, and scour was limited to three feet. But there were losses. Items stored on high shelves in the garage were swept away, along with outdoor propane tanks and a boat that had been chained to a tree. The heating and cooling ductwork, located just below the floor joists, was ruined; but the Smith’s foresight prevented damage to the furnace, hot water heater and electrical panel, all located in closets on the main living level of the home.

The rest of the neighborhood fared much worse, with every house suffering severe damage or total destruction. “It’s completely heartbreaking” said Robin. “Tropical Storm Lee set a new standard for danger and devastation in our area.”