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Yilun Cheng Interview on ABC13

[00:00:02] **ABC Interviewer:** We'll take a look at these images. Harvey was supposed to be Houston's wake up call. Six months after the storm, the Kinder Houston area survey showed a majority of people supported more regulations on development and flood prone areas. But now, eight years later, a Houston Chronicle investigation finds builders have constructed more than 65,000 new properties in flood zones across Harris, Montgomery, Fort Bend, Galveston and Brazoria counties. Houston Chronicle reporter Yilun Cheng joins us live with more on her investigation. Thanks for joining us.

[00:00:34] **Yilun Cheng:** Thank you for having me.

[00:00:36] **ABC Interviewer:** So I want to ask you first, what made you and your team think we need to look into this all this new development going around in the greater Houston area and where it's happening?

[00:00:44] **Yilun Cheng:** Sure. When we first started the project, the main question on our mind was, what has Houston actually learned from Hurricane Harvey? As you mentioned, many people see the storm as a wake-up call about the danger of building a flood prone land. But the region keeps growing, new subdivisions have gone up, and we keep hearing from people who bought into brand new neighborhoods, only to realize later that the property is prone to flooding. So, that made us wonder, "Is it just a few unlucky families or is it part of a bigger pattern here?" So, we dug into the data.

[00:01:17] **ABC Interviewer:** Help us understand kind of the patchwork of regulations that we have in the greater Houston area now after the storm, that regulate what new home buyers can know about a property and where these properties are allowed to be built.

[00:01:32] **Yilun Cheng:** Sure. So, the problem is, Texas, like many other states, doesn't have a statewide flood-building code. So, it's really up to individual cities and

counties to decide on their own regulations. Some are strict, others not so much. And this patchwork of regulations has really left large parts of the region exposed.

[00:01:53] **ABC Interviewer:** Now, what did the data reveal about development in the Greater Houston area? Once you really started looking over your research, you mentioned that number 65,000 properties built in flood plains.

[00:02:05] **Yilun Cheng:** What really stood out to me was it's happening everywhere. We're not talking about just a few subdivisions here and there. We see it north of Houston in Montgomery County. Out west in Katy and Fort Bend County. And down south by Galveston County. So basically, everywhere in the region where you've seen a lot of growth in the past decade.

[00:02:24] **ABC Interviewer:** You mentioned these families. You were thinking maybe it's just a few unlucky people, but really it wound up being much more widespread. Tell us about the Todd family.

[00:02:35] **Yilun Cheng:** Of course. So, it's really personal stories like theirs that stuck out to me the most. You have a lot of families who are moving into the region from out of state or from other regions in Texas. They weren't here during Harvey. They haven't personally experienced the kind of flooding that Houstonians faced on a daily basis. So, they weren't really prioritizing flood risk when they were looking for their new home. And then they thought they got their dream home. You know, a lot of space, that Houston suburban lifestyle, only to find out months later, not years, but months that their house can flood every time a big storm hits.

[00:03:12] **ABC Interviewer:** And tell us about the impact of building in these flood plains, not just for home buyers or people buying properties, but even for just the community, the greater community at large, of course.

[00:03:23] **Yilun Cheng:** So, experts told me that this doesn't just affect families who end up living in those houses, but entire neighborhoods, because how it works is when natural land is replaced by concrete and rooftops, the stormwater that once soaked into the soil has to go somewhere else, and that can push flooding into nearby neighborhoods, too.

[00:03:42] **ABC Interviewer:** And so really, the Todd family and what's happening in their neighborhood, the data revealed it's not unique, right?

[00:03:49] **Yilun Cheng:** No.

[00:03:50] **ABC Interviewer:** Very, very interesting topic to discuss this morning, but what did you learn about these home builders and how they've been able to build so many properties in these areas that would be perhaps considered risky? Right.

[00:04:02] **Yilun Cheng:** So, when we looked at who is behind this floodplain building, boom, you see some of the biggest names in home building industry that pop up again and again. That includes Lennar Homes, Perry homes, D.R. Horton, Meritage Homes. They each built hundreds of new houses inside the FEMA floodplains since Harvey. And it's not just that they build a lot in general, but they also seemed to be increasingly reliant on flood-prone land.

[00:04:30] **ABC Interviewer:** Because that's the land that's left. I would imagine.

[00:04:32] **Yilun Cheng:** Land availability is a big problem.

[00:04:34] **ABC Interviewer:** And what about the relationship that these homebuilders have with our leaders, our elected officials? Right.

[00:04:39] **Yilun Cheng:** Well, first, there's the cultural element that Texas has a very strong private-property rights ethos. People don't like the idea of the government telling them what they can or cannot do with their property. And then on top of that, a lot, a lot of home builders, the developers and real estate interests have significant political influence locally. Some of them are big donors. So, experts told me we have a system designed to facilitate development rather than pumping the brakes when the risk is too high.

[00:05:08] **ABC Interviewer:** I want to zoom out with you because we talked about how Harvey was supposed to be that wake-up call. Were you in your investigation able to

find any ways where things have perhaps gotten a little better in terms of flood protections in our area?

[00:05:21] **Yilun Cheng:** Sure. Some local governments actually implemented stronger flood building rules since Harvey. In Houston, for example, now you have to elevate your houses a little higher compared to pre-COVID regulations. But as I mentioned, you know, that differs very widely from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and doesn't apply to the whole region.

[00:05:42] **ABC Interviewer:** What else did experts tell you may need to change moving forward? Or what questions should we be responsible for asking as consumers moving forward to help protect ourselves and our communities?

[00:05:55] **Yilun Cheng:** We seem to be repeating the same development patterns that made Harvey so devastating in the first place. Experts told me we simply need stronger rules and also more coherence across the region. There's also the question of climate change, right? Some people told me, you know, we just haven't fully grappled with the full effect of climate change and what that means for the region. And unless we change course, the devastation and the displacement are only going to get worse.

[00:06:24] **ABC Interviewer:** All right. Very, very important reporting for our area. Thank you so much for coming in and sharing that with us. And of course, you can find much more of her reporting on the Houston Chronicle's website.