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Flood workshop told Reinstatement of Sauk dam is up to U.S. Congress

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MOUNT VERNON – If Skagit Valley residents want a flood containment dam on the Sauk River, they'll have to go back to Congress for a change in the Wild and Scenic River legislation for the Skagit, officials from the Army Corps of Engineers said here Wednesday night.

But the prospects for revisions to Skagit designation as wild and scenic appear dim, they added.

Here to explain the latest flood control proposals in a public workshop at the county administration building. Corps project manager Vernon Cook told the standing-room-only audience that provision for a Sauk dam was eliminated from the Wild and Scenic Rivers legislation in Congress.

As introduced by Rep. Lloyd Meeds (D-Everett), the flood containment structure would have been possible, if deemed feasible, he stated.

But Congressional sentiment is presently against Corps dam-building due to environmental and economic concerns, according to Corps study manager Forest Brooks.

Although the Corps has never made a detailed study of the Sauk flood containment structure, rough estimates put

the cost at between \$115 and \$165 million," and that could be 100 percent off," Brooks stated.

However, the county commissioners have contacted the local Congressional delegation about an upriver flood containment dam. Commissioner Bud Norris confirmed following the meeting.

"Everyone here agrees that the Sauk dam is the best answer," Sterling area farmer Elinar Knutzen stated. "Have we given up on it since the politicians sold us down the river?"

Kuntzen's remark brought applause from the audience.

Consideration of the Sauk dam, along with the Avon bypass, surfaced amid Corps explanations of the trade-offs involved in levee and channel improvements. Of five new proposals for levee improvements, all of which would offer protection from a 100-year flood to urban areas and 50-year protection to rural areas, an option known as Alternative 3e offers the best balance of impacts, Brooks said.

That alternative calls for a ring dike around the north side of Burlington and a weir structure between Burlington and Sedro-Woolley, which would allow flood

waters beyond a 50-year level into the Samish River drainage area. Floods of a 100-year frequency would be no worse for the Samish and would keep backwater flooding in the Nookachamps-Clear Lake area below that of other options.

Alternative 3e would cost an estimated \$55 million, with a local share of \$11 million. County Public Works director Gene Sampley has said the local share would probably be closer to \$3 million since the county already has much of the right of way.

As in any compromise, the trade-offs appeared to satisfy no one.

Many of those in attendance were from the Nookachamps-Clear Lake area, concerned over what they viewed as a lack of concern for impacts to their homes and farms.

"I'm fed up to here," Nookachamps dairy farmer and county planning commission member Ken Johnson exclaimed. "We're being ignored."

"The buildings in the area were built there based on historic flood levels and now we're being asked to accept more water just because we haven't had dikes in the past," he stated.

"We're gonna fight it," he added. "We're gonna fight it right down to the last drop of water."

No matter which option the county commissioners decide to pursue, the Nookachamps-Clear Lake area will get more flood water, according to Cook. Even if the commissioners decide to do nothing, flood waters would be deeper in the Nookachamps area, he said.

Side effects of projects are called consequential damages, he explained. As a general rule, consequentialy damaged areas are not compensated, he added.

That comment seemed to bring out the frustrations of the Nookachamps residents, who asked repeatedly if they

weren't being asked to suffer the consequences of 100-year protection for Mount Vernon and Burlington.

But following the meeting, Norris revealed that the commissioners are looking into some form of compensation for the consequentially damaged areas, perhaps with aid from the federal government.

Several of those who spoke asked that the county choose the Avon bypass option and begin a program of dredging at the mouth of the river.

Sedimentation will build up in the river bed under any of the options, even the alternative which calls for doing nothing, Brooks explained. But dredging would be a costly maintenance which would be entirely the responsibility of the county, he said.

Annual costs for dredging would run into the millions of dollars, Cook stated.

The Avon bypass, authorized by Congress in 1936 and since relegated to "the back burner", is estimated to cost \$80 to \$90 million, with a local share of \$15 to \$20 million and annual maintenance costs of \$150,000 to \$200,000. That price tag has resulted in a less than enthusiastic response in the past, Cook said.

The bypass would require widening of the river from the railroad bridge above Mount Vernon to the beginning of the Avon bend. From there, flood water would be carried across the flats, across the route of State Highway 20 to Padilla Bay at Telegraph Slough.

Cook cautioned that the county has not yet decided on an option and may decide against any project until a contract is signed with the Corps, which could come in the next six to eight months. Rights of way must be secured before the contract is signed, he explained.

Once the agreement is signed, bids would be let and construction could start as early as mid-1980, he stated.

The county commissioners are expected to meet with Corps officials in Seattle in the first week of January. At that time, the commissioners could give more definite word on which option they want, according to Brooks.

Further progress on the levee improvement project also depends on funding from Congress for the next fiscal year, Cook added.