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Lower levee okay is expected today

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MOUNT VERNON – A final go-ahead on legislation for the expanded lower levee improvement project is expected from Skagit County commissioners today.

Commissioner Jerry Mansfield said he will take a letter with him to Washington, D.C. next week asking the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to submit funding legislation for the levee improvements.

Mansfield will be in Washington attending the National Association of Regional Councils meeting.

The go-ahead on legislation is not the same as final county approval on the project, Mansfield cautioned. Only when county officials put their signatures to a Corps of Engineers contract this spring will the project proceed.

“We have made the decisions as they have come for us to make,” he commented.

Legislation authorizing and funding the expanded project was not a part of President Carter’s recommendations to Congress because it was prepared long before details of the project were known, he explained.

Word that the commissioners would seek Congressional action on the project came as county and city of Mount Vernon officials met Monday to iron out what was earlier described as “communications problems”.

Mount Vernon reportedly had sought closer involvement by elected officials with Corps of Engineers planning.

Corps project manager Vernon Cook said after the meeting that progress had been made to improve city-county-Corps cooperation.

Acknowledging that a problem had existed, Cook commented, “Coordination is moving along now. Communication is improving all the time. Things have changed in the last two or three weeks.”

Pointing out that Mount Vernon would feel the greatest impact of any Skagit County city, Cook explained Corps plans for levees through the downtown area.

Much of Mayor Jack Miller’s concerns centered on Lions Park, where the Corps plans to build a tilt-up flood wall, and on revetment parking.

Dick Swanson of the Corps explained that the tilt-up flood wall would lie flat to the ground, resembling a sidewalk, during normal river conditions. During high water, the wall could be tilted upright to form a wall.

In other areas where Mount Vernon fronts the river, a 12-foot stationary wall with gaps for access would provide the 100-year protection the Corps foresees, Swanson said. The stationary wall is half as costly as the tilt-up wall, he stated.

Cook also said the Corps plans to strengthen the rip-rapping under the revetment.

The project would take away only about a dozen parking spaces, he stated.

Miller said he would have no comment on the project until he has time to look at it further.

An area north of the present Lions Park, which the city hopes to acquire through a trade with Georgia Pacific for land on Little Mountain, would be to the river side of the proposed levees. Building would be prohibited.

But Miller said the levee improvements would have no effect on the trade since the city does not plan to build any structures there.

Glen Davison, one of three city council members to attend the meeting, commented afterward that the city had not been critical of the Corps project.

“We just didn’t understand it,” he stated.