

September 23, 1979

Skagit Valley Herald

Proposed levee on Skagit River. . . brings variety of opinions

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Skagit County residents will decide Nov. 6 whether they want to pay for the county's portion of the \$55 million Skagit River levee project.

The project, to be paid for primarily by the federal government, is designed to provide 50- to 100-year flood protection in the Skagit Valley, and 500-year protection to Mount Vernon, said Don Nelson, director of flood control for the county's Public Works Department.

Nelson said the county's portion of the project is about \$14 million.

"We have about half of that under our belt," he said, adding that the county already owns land and rights-of-way for the proposed levee improvements.

Property taxes would be increased if voters approve the levee measure, Nelson said.

"Different rates could be established for residents who would obtain more benefit from the levee project," he added. "It will be resolved prior to elections."

The project must receive money from the county and may fail if voters do not approve the levy proposition.

"I don't know what will happen then," Nelson said. "We've got to come up with the money."

The project also will be hindered if President Carter vetoes the \$10.8 billion energy and water development appropriation

bill for 1980, which contains \$1 million for the Skagit River project. The money was appropriated to hire consulting engineers for the project.

David Gwaltney, staff assistant for the Senate Appropriation Committee, said Carter must act on the bill by Sept. 25.

"There is some question on whether the President will sign the bill," Gwaltney said. He noted that the bulk of the money in the bill is for Energy Department projects.

Levee construction will be completed about 1984 if the appropriations bill is approved and Skagit County residents agree to pay for the county's share.

Nelson said the proposed levee protection will begin west of Sedro-Woolley on the north side of the Skagit River and continue downstream along the north fork of the river.

Another levee may be built on the south side of the Skagit River from the Burlington Northern bridge downstream along the south fork of the river. Levees may be constructed to protect Fir Island, the area between the forks.

The Nookachamps area will act as a natural drainage basin, Nelson said. And the county will provide flood protection in that area by raising houses and by building a levee around the city of Clear Lake.

Around 90 percent of the land planned for levees is privately owned and

around 100 homes will have to be raised up or moved, Nelson added.

The project, first called Mount Vernon downstream, was authorized in 1966. Improvements for the area west of Sedro-Woolley were considered in 1978 and have become part of the project.

Nelson said residents in the Nookachamps have opposed the project.

He said they complained because a levee on the north side of the river would increase flooding on the south side, endangering homes and dairy cattle.

“But any house that will be flooded will be raised above the flood plain,” Nelson said.

Nelson said numerous residents proposed a dam on the Sauk River because the river accounts for about 40 percent of the flood waters.

But building a dam on the Sauk is illegal because the Sauk-Suiattle River system was designated a Wild and Scenic River two years ago.

Nelson said dams are expensive, time-consuming to build and environmentally troublesome.

“It’s 15 years before there are any benefits,” Nelson said. “And the environmental struggle to get one would be awesome.”

He estimated a dam would cost more than \$100 million – twice as much as the proposed levee project.

Most residents, however, agree that some flood protection is needed. A series of serious floods have occurred over the past 70 years. They include:

- 1909, -a 90- to 100-year flood;
- 1917, -a 75- to 80- year flood;
- 1921, -a 80- to 90- year flood;
- 1951, -a 20-year flood;
- 1975, -a 12-year flood.