

Skagit Valley Herald

Yes on flood control

Many persons in the Skagit Valley have waited and battled for more than 40 years for adequate flood control. They have seen the Skagit River rampage and they know what it means.

Others have been here less time than that, but they know what it means too – having seen a mild sample of what a raging Skagit can do in the flood of four years ago. Even in that comparatively mild runaway, a few more inches of river height or a collapsed levee would have spelled certain disaster.

Now, we are closer to achieving flood control than ever before. Many believe that if this opportunity is passed over, there will not be another chance in this generation.

The Skagit has a history of severe flooding and the Skagit River Levee Improvement Project, backed on the November ballot by Citizens for Flood Control, is the last viable means of flood protection for the Skagit Valley.

The Avon Bypass has been jeered out of all practical existence. It is highly doubtful if any more dams will be allowed to be built, especially with major portions of the Skagit and its tributaries included in the federal Wild and Scenic Rivers system.

In this century alone, the Skagit River has flooded the Lower Valley 16 times. This is an average major flood about once every five and a half years.

In the years of 1906, 1909, 1917 and 1921, all within the lifetime of many residents, the mighty Skagit has approached floods of 100-year frequency – a term applied

to about 200,000 cubic feet per second. Floods of this magnitude have catastrophic effect, wreaking tremendous damage on Skagit County and resulting in large scale loss of property and probably loss of life.

Voters should consider all these facts when they go to the polls Nov. 6 and vote on Skagit County's Proposition 2, which, if approved, would allow the county to pay up to \$14 million in local matching funds for the long-planned, long-awaited Skagit River levee and flood control project. The federal government will supply the rest of the money.

The county's share, though, may be less. When the value of Skagit County dike property and existing right-of-ways is appraised, at what is estimated at a minimum of \$5 million, our contribution may well be reduced to a little more than \$9 million, since the total local cost does not reflect Skagit County's in-kind contribution.

Even without this reduction, a taxpayer with property valued at \$50,000, would pay about \$28 per year at present county valuations. As property values increase, the annual rate paid by the taxpayer would decrease. This is a bargain when compared to the severe financial losses we would all suffer, either directly or indirectly, in the event of a breakthrough flood.

It should be pointed out, too, that the urban areas of Skagit County, if this proposition is passed, will be relieved of the burden of flood plain insurance, the annual cost of which now exceeds the proposed bond assessment.

The project will also relieve rural areas of Skagit County of high dike repair and construction assessments and will not only raise but repair those present dikes which are now mushy, sandy or built on sandy foundations.

Old timers said it was a miracle even in the comparatively mild flood of 1975 that some of the dikes didn't give way to the raging waters. Without the improved levees, a 100-year flood would rampage through the valley, destroy and water dikes and roar through the town of LaConner.

The plan – which has evolved from countless public meetings over several years with county engineers, commissioners, citizen committees, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the general public – would also give protection give protection to some 25 public buildings. It includes protection of about 40 miles of city streets and 150 miles of county and state roads.

The project, which was selected for the ballot by Skagit County Commissioners in September after they sifted through a number of alternative plans, is known as Alternative 3E. It meets the standards taken into consideration when the Skagit River was designated as a Wild and Scenic River.

It offers 100-year flood protection to the valley west of Mount Vernon and Burlington to Bay View Ridge, including Avon, West Mount Vernon, Fredonia and the area surrounding Burlington. It offers 50-year protection to the Lower Valley to the bay, including the LaConner area, Fir Island and the both the north and south forks of the river.

Mount Vernon receives virtual total protection, or a designation of 500-year protection. Many thousands of acres of farm and residential land, which are now vulnerable, will be protected.

Originally providing dike protection only to Burlington, the levee project has now been extended to Sedro-Woolley.

In addition, the project gives protection to the Anacortes water treatment

plant and supply. This facility, which also supplies water to North Whidbey and Oak Harbor, is extremely vulnerable to flood damage and was nearly lost in the flood of 1975.

Proposition 2 is backed by the various diking districts and the Skagit Flood Control Council, which is made up of the drainage district commissioners, representatives of the Skagit County Department of Public Works and the Skagit Conservation District. In addition to the endorsement of Skagit County Commissioners, it is endorsed by the Skagit Regional Planning Council and the cities of Mount Vernon and Burlington, plus numerous civic groups and countless citizens.

Granted, it would impact the Nookachamps area, a fact which is well known. Here, non-structural flood protection will be offered, which includes safety mounds for cattle and other livestock and the raising of all homes within that area and the Sterling area to save heights.

A number of farmers living and operating farms in the Sterling district and within the Samish River basin have expressed opposition to the plan, saying they will be victims of overflow from the river caused by water backing up from the higher dikes downstream.

Their concerns are understandable.

Taking this into consideration, the county's flood control manager, Donald Nelson, explains it this way: Under present conditions, water would start moving into the Samish River basin from the Sterling area when a 40-year flood hits. The volume would increase as the river nears a 100-year frequency, at which time Skagit River water would admittedly be discharging into the Samish River at a rate of about 60,000 cubic feet per second. No water would be moved into the Samish River basin until a 50-year flood occurred and then only at the same amount as would now flow in under present conditions.

So those areas are being offered 50-year protection instead of the 40-year vulnerability they now have.

As we said earlier, a large flood of long duration could cause the river channel to change somewhere between Sedro-Woolley and Burlington, with the entire Skagit River heading for the Samish River, obviously causing a catastrophic effect downstream.

With this project, however, erosion control structures will be erected on both sides of Sterling Hill to prevent this from happening, affording the Samish basin protection from a potential channel change which it does not now enjoy.

Put more simply, these areas will all have better protection than they now have.

Some adjustments will be made in the plans, and we agree that some changes are needed. But, in effect, this is the plan the county will go with if voters approve. To reject this measure means to begin all over again, to lose forty years of work. It will mean forfeiting studies already paid for and losing the momentum we now enjoy with the Corps and our Congressional delegation.

Flood specialists have termed the Skagit River "a disaster waiting to happen."

If this measure fails and a major flood occurs, we will pay a cost almost beyond our present imagination. It will be a price we can ill afford.