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Decisive defeat at polls

Flood control future unclear

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SKAGIT COUNTY – The future of a Skagit River flood control project is unclear today following a decisive defeat at the polls.

An aide to Senator Warren Magnuson said the senator, “for the moment”, probably will not continue to seek federal authorization of the expanded project, and county commissioners said they would have to “reassess” the plan.

Proposition 2, a \$14 million bond issue to finance the local share of the project, was soundly defeated by a 71.4 “no” vote.

That percentage was generally consistent throughout the county, including Mount Vernon and Burlington, areas described as having the most to gain from the project.

Mount Vernon, which would receive protection from floods with a 1-in-500-year chance of occurrence, voted against the project by a 68.3 percent vote.

And although Burlington would receive 100-year flood level protection from the project, voters there rejected the proposition by a 65.9 percent vote.

The total percentage against the project, not including absentee ballots, was nearly identical to the 71.6 percent vote against nuclear power.

Vernon Cook, project manager for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, speculated that the two results were interrelated.

Because opponents of the flood project have said it would free farmland for development, Cook interpreted votes against both propositions as anti-development.

Magnuson aide Duane Trekker said the Senator “wants to have a look at the entire matter again” before he continues to push for congressional authorization.

“When the local people speak at the polls, he (Magnuson) certainly does not want to ram something down their throats,” Trekker said.

Magnuson will probably continue to seek appropriation of funds for a previously authorized portion of the plan, from Skagit Bay to Mount Vernon, Trekker said.

But the county commissioners and Corps of Engineers need to come up with some method to finance the local share of that original plan, he said.

“The ball is in the court of the county commissioners – it’s their burden to provide the county’s share of the funds,” he said.

In Nookachamp Valley, which would be adversely impacted by implementation of the project, residents gathered on election night to await the returns, and were surprised and relieved at the results.

So surprised were they at the margin of defeat, that when the first returns were aired on the radio they thought they’d heard wrong.

Nookachamp farmer Larry Kunzler said the vote proves that county residents do not want to spend millions of dollars on a project that would not protect the entire valley.

He and his neighbors placed the blame on the diking districts and county engineers for having “grossly mismanaged the Skagit River for years.”

Bud Norris, chairman of the Skagit County Board of Commissioners, said today the county would have to take a second look at the plan and examine alternatives. He said he is hesitant to push the present plan further because of the overwhelming mandate.

“We’ll have to reassess our flood control philosophy and talk with a lot of people involved in the formulation of the plan to see where to go from here,” he said.

“The idea of flood protection for the Skagit Valley will not be dropped,” he added. “We’ll continue to work at some type of plan that would be more acceptable to a greater percent of the population than this plan (3E).”

Corps project manager Cook said although he had not expected approval of the project, he was surprised at the margin of defeat.

“It’s pretty conclusive. It’s worse than I would have thought,” he commented.

Cook said the corps will meet soon with county officials to determine where to go from here.

A statement prepared by several Nookachamp residents called for the consolidation of the present diking districts into a north and south district.

Environmental impact statements should accompany any proposed levee improvements to stop the current practice of “districts acting independently of each other no matter who gets hurt.”

They also called for a no-growth policy for Burlington and Fir Island unless all new structures are built to the 100-year flood plain without using the current land fill method.

Local ordinances should be passed restricting the sale of land within the flood plain, the statement said.

It concludes that public meetings should be held to inform individuals how they would currently be affected if a flood occurs.

“Then each individual would be responsible for floodproofing their own structures using non-structural methods,” it said.