

Flood group pushes ahead with Sauk dam

8-21-81
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MOUNT VERNON — Members of the Skagit River Flood Control Committee put their official stamp of approval Thursday night on a recommendation to seek construction of a dam on the Sauk River.

The committee, established by the county Board of Commissioners last October, also recommended in a 13-2 vote that a "restricted density floodplain" be established in Skagit County as soon as possible to meet a requirement by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

After hearing a final report from subcommittee chairman Bob Hulbert, the committee voted unanimously in favor of a Sauk River dam — their "highest priority" on a list of flood control alternatives.

They approved a recommendation that "... Skagit County explore, along with all federal, state and local agencies involved and our congressional delegation, the study of a flood control structure on the Sauk River."

The Sauk River has been cited as a contributor of as much as 50 percent of Skagit River flood waters during past floods.

"A flood control structure on the Sauk is the only solution offering flood relief for all of the Skagit Valley, particularly the upriver areas above Sedro-Woolley," the committee concluded.

Committee members had told the Board of Commissioners Tuesday their top priority is "some sort of definitive answer" as to the feasibility of a Sauk River dam.

U.S. Rep. Al Swift, D-2nd District, stated recently he would be willing to help the committee gather additional data on the proposal. But he emphasized an amendment to the federal Wild and Scenic River Act would be necessary and he termed that action "virtually impossible."

Additionally, Swift noted past statements by Army Corps of Engineers officials who said such a project would cost too much money. Finally, implications of the "Boldt II" court decision regarding protection of salmon runs would stand as a serious obstacle to the project, the congressman said.

Committee members said they are aware of the obstacles facing a Sauk River dam project but they feel strongly the dam is the best answer they can suggest to their commissioners.

On the issue of floodway designation, the committee voted to forward immediately

"restricted density floodplain."

Establishment of a floodway has been ordered by FEMA officials who have warned they will do the job themselves if county officials cannot concur on a proposal.

Subcommittee chairman Arnold Hansen presented his group's report, which concluded: "... approximately 25 percent of the flow area (downstream from Sedro-Woolley) kept at its current elevation, would accommodate the flood flow estimated."

In other words, property owners in the floodplain would be prohibited from altering 25 percent of their property in any way, thus providing an unobstructed flow area for flood waters.

Hansen conceded in response to criticism by fellow committeeman Larry Kunzler that the 25 percent figure was not based on technically established flood flow figures.

Hansen added, however, that a hydraulic analysis of the area has not been made so the committee must base its recommendation on estimates.

"If they (FEMA) determine it would take (development restrictions on) almost all of the floodplain, this is no solution to our problem," said Hansen.

His committee's report said there is no way to tell where flood waters will travel once they reach the river delta. They concluded: "Designating a specific flow way with accompanying controls would in effect be confiscation of property."

Committee members Kunzler and Carl Vandesar voted against the recommendation, citing concern that the 25 percent development restriction was too low.

"This might not be the last we hear from FEMA," said Committee Chairman Jess Knutzen following the vote, "but at least it's a start."

In further action last night the committee formally adopted a recommendation to compile data on existing dikes and encourage dike or flood fight schools sponsored by the county or the Army Corps of Engineers.

They also recommended the county set aside \$400,000 annually in a river improvement fund. That money, they said, would be used on a priority basis to match expenditures by dike district commissioners to improve their dikes.

The density floodplain recommendation will be forwarded immediately to the commissioners but the dam and dike proposals will be forwarded later with proposals regarding channelization and