

Stop building in flood plain, feds warn

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BURLINGTON — Construction should be stopped in the Skagit River flood plain until a floodway for the river is designated, a federal official said Tuesday.

Members of the Burlington City Council told during a study session that no significant construction should continue in the Skagit River flood plain until a floodway has been designated and approved by the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA).

Chuck Steele, FEMA representative, said that even if local officials agree upon a floodway designation by June 1, the county's recommendation may not be approved and processed by FEMA before June 1982, perhaps December, 1981, at the earliest.

"If you allow indiscriminate development in the floodway, the water will rise, and according to FEMA regulations, it can't rise more than one foot in any one point," he said.

Twenty years ago, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers proposed a floodway that bypassed southern Burlington to Gages Slough, across Highway 20 and eventually emptied into Padilla Bay, city engineer John Leonard reported. That particular floodway had a capacity of carrying 60,000 cubic feet per second.

The latest proposal by the Corps was made in 1978, when a new dike system around Burlington and part of Mount Vernon was considered. The new dikes would have given Burlington 100-year flood protection and Mount Vernon nearly 500-year protection, Leonard said. But that proposal was defeated because the

overflow would go onto Samish Island and surrounding farmland, giving those areas only 50-year protection.

Under the Federal Flood Insurance Program, the last option available is to choose a floodway which can adequately handle 90,000 cubic feet of water per second, Leonard said.

"That's a substantial swathe of property — about one mile wide," he commented. He demonstrated several optional routes for the floodway: along the river channel, which would "take the south end of Burlington and virtually all the business district in Mount Vernon;" or splitting the floodway by taking part through Samish to the Swinomish Slough or through Mount Vernon; or taking it all through Samish Valley in a 5,000-7,000-foot wide swathe; or taking it all through the south end of Burlington along the route of

the old Avon Bypass in a 4,000-7,000 foot wide swathe.

"All of these possibilities affect the City of Burlington," Leonard said.

FEMA floodway proposals usually follow the river channel, and are called "equal conveyance" floodways.

"Equal conveyance means the ability to use certain portions of the floodway while reserving others, without worsening the situation," Steele said.

A FEMA designated floodway would probably follow the river and then veer into the area pinpointed for the Cascade Mall, according to Larry Kunzler, local farmer and activist in flood control campaigns.

Arnold Hansen, Burlington representative on the county flood committee, likened the floodway to agricultural zoning

because the area must remain free of development.

"It's really a zoning matter, in that should everywhere else be filled, there would be someplace that could take this 90,000 cubic feet of water. Using that concept, it becomes compatible with farm zoning," he said. "The committee will recommend an area that will be the least disruptive to present zoning. A lot of work has gone into zoning and regional planning and to just disregard it would be wrong."

Under present flood control conditions, Skagit County residents can purchase up to \$35,000 of federal flood insurance. Once the floodway is designated and approved, Steele said, the insurance will rise to \$180,000.

Although local officials have the first option on the floodway designation, FEMA regulations must be followed. And any

major development in the flood plain before the designation of the floodway could adversely affect its positioning, Steele said.

"It (the floodway) will resemble something more of a political floodway than a hydraulics floodway, in that the planning is at the local level in this case," Steele said. "There are socio-economic considerations as well as physical planning, and that makes it Political with a capital P."

But while the planning is taking place locally, the final decision will come from FEMA and Burlington Mayor Ray Henery expressed concern over a loss of control at the local level.

"If you won't practice land management for flood insurance that will reduce or avoid future losses, then we will," Steele said.