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Hamilton plans fail to move residents

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HAMILTON — Many residents of this upriver community told U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officials Saturday they are not so sure they are in favor of a plan to physically move the town of Hamilton to an area safe from flooding.

Over 200 Hamilton residents turned out Saturday morning to gather information and express their views on the proposal by the Corps to move the town as a flood protection measure. The trend of comments made to Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and Corps representatives in attendance at the meeting, questioned the idea as residents expressed a desire for more information from officials before any final decisions are made.

A woman's voice from the bleachers said midway through the meeting, "I

think you can cross me off right now," while others chose to shake their head as they slowly filtered out of the meeting, reducing the crowd down to some 50 residents by the close of the two-hour question and answer period. Homer Wyatt, a former Hamilton resident who has "watched the town since 1915," questioned whether the "older residents are willing to give up and move the town out."

"If a majority want to move the town, move it. If a majority want to stay, let it be. Everyone should be contacted and not make a few make the decisions for them," Wyatt said. A 40-year Hamilton resident, George Mahaffy, said he is "completely against" the moving plan, but would be in favor of a coordinated effort to "start cleaning out the river."

"If we are going to leave to our great-grandchildren what our forefathers left to us, we are going to have to

do something," he said, adding that moving the town was not the solution. "If we don't work together as a unit, Hamilton, Lyman, Sedro-Woolley, Burlington and Mount Vernon, this river is going to be a cut up mess."

Throughout the meeting, Mayor Tom Hooper stressed to the residents that the study was in a very preliminary phase.

"We're not organized right now, we're not moving the town right now. We are just getting the opinions of the people," Hooper said.

Should the moving measure be seriously considered, it will take 1-00

percent participation of Hamilton residents, Walter Farrar, chief of the Regional Planning Section for the Corps, told the group huddled in the morning chill of the Hamilton Gymnasium.

"It is important that you folks let the mayor and council know just what you are really thinking. This will take 100 percent participation. If the city wants to stop at any time, that's OK with us," Farrar said. "The mayor and the council are the hand leaders, they can stop the music any time they want." The idea to move the town is one of six alternatives considered for environmental, engineering and economic standards and requirements by the Corps when originally contacted by town officials in October, according to Charles Crow, flood reduction study manager.

The alternatives included no change, upstream storage, raising structures, dredging the river, a ring levee system and moving the town.

The first five were rejected during preliminary studies for a variety of

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reasons including provisions for regulations imposed by FEMA and the Wild and Scenic River designation on the Skagit River, leaving the moving concept as the only viable alternative, Crow said.

A preliminary look at the moving idea showed a "suitable site" north of Highway 20, approximately ½ mile away from the present location near Hamilton Cemetery Road and 15 feet higher in elevation, Crow said.

The study provides for six residential blocks of quarter-acre lots, including two trees and ten shrubs for each home at the new location, according to Crow. Streets, sidewalks and a septic system would be installed, as well as underground power and phone lines. New foundations would also be provided for the transported homes to be placed on when moved, he said.

The benefits to the town cited by Crow included "no more flood worries," and associated problems with high water damaging property. Hamilton was flooded in 1975, 1979 and 1980. The problem noted by Crow, however, was the way Hamilton residents are divided on the proposed alternative.

"There is no federal plan that would force you to go. Unless there is 100 percent participation in this, the town will not be moved and the no change alternative will become the eventual future for Hamilton," he said.

"There is a sentiment in this town, some people have locked their heels and won't sell, they won't move," Crow said.

The question of funding such a proposal could also be a stumbling block in the proposed move. Preliminary estimates show the cost of the project at close to \$5 million, Farrar

said. However, by the 1948 Flood Control Act, the Corps is limited to an investment of \$2 million on small flood control projects such as the Hamilton move, he said. To make up for the remainder of the costs, Farrar said a funding "package" would be approached, seeking support from additional sources including state, county and local funds.

The report presently being prepared by the Corps is under a budget of \$13,000 in federal funds. The report is scheduled for completion in March, at which time it will be reviewed by Corps officials in Portland and, if approved, forwarded to the Washington, D.C. office for consideration and possible funding of a detailed study which could start late this summer, Farrar said. Town officials would also be contacted at this point opinion, and regularly should the project continue, Farrar said.

Funding of such a detailed project report is also in question as allocations for 1982 funds have already been made and the town may have to "take its place in line just like everyone else," Farrar said.

"At the present time, there is zero amount of money for studies past March so we don't really know if we

will be making any detailed studies," Farrar said. "All of the fiscal year 1982 funds have been allocated, however, the program changes throughout the year. It may be possible that some funds could be allocated to the Hamilton study but we really have no idea at this time."

Following the meeting, Farrar said he was pleased with the interest shown by Hamilton residents and expressed the need to gather additional information so their questions and concerns could be answered in detail.

"I think there was a lot of interest shown by the community and that is important," Farrar said. "There are still a lot of questions that they have and we expected that. If additional studies are approved, we think we will be able to answer all of those questions."

Hooper agreed that there were "a lot of questions and a lot of answers," but nothing was resolved at the meeting. "We will keep on top of it and get the opinions of the people, then see where we stand," Hooper said.

Mike Cassidy, representing Congressman Al Swift's office was also in attendance at the meeting "to hear the opinions of the people," which he will report back to the congressman in his Washington, D.C. office.

