

# Citizens attack federal flood level estimates

by John Draper

**MOUNT VERNON** — The Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) insistence that residents need flood insurance and local wariness of this insistence both precariously rest on the question of just how deep Mount Vernon flood waters could get.

At a recent public hearing at Hillcrest Park in Mount Vernon, many citizens stood up and called the 100-year flood elevations on which the flood insurance program is based everything from inadequate to ridiculous.

These elevations are of particular concern to residents here because if Mount Vernon enters the federal flood insurance program all new construction and substantial improvements will have to be elevated above them.

Mount Vernon has been given a July 1 deadline by FEMA to write a law requiring floodproof construction here and thereby become eligible for the regular phase of the federal flood insurance program.

For the most part, a floodplain construction ordinance would require elevation above the 100-year flood plain. A 100-year flood carries around 270,000 cubic feet of water per second and has a 1 percent chance of happening every year — or a 25 percent chance of happening over the 30-year term of most mortgages.

The 100-year flood is not the worst flood that can happen here. There is such a thing as a 500-year flood.

According to the Army Corps of Engineers studies used by FEMA to figure out insurance rates, the 100-year flood will bring differing depths across the lower Skagit Valley. For example, the Corps figures show a 100-year flood elevation of around 30 feet mean sea level for downtown Mount Vernon.

FEMA director of natural and technological hazards Chuck Steele defended these figures as the best data available, noting they haven't been called to question any place other than here. Steele admitted, though, that the flooding problem in this extra-large delta area is complex, saying it presents an "above average confusion of engineering judgment."

To many of the citizens who spoke at last week's public hearing there seemed to be little confusion over the flood hazard here. Many of the people who spoke up said they've lived through many bad floods and have never seen anything approach what FEMA claims will happen here during a 100-year flood.

Steele pointed out that Congress doesn't accept historical data as valid for flood insurance studies.

Denny LeGro, former Mount Vernon City engineer, called the Corps flood elevations "overly cautious," he said the problem with the flood elevation map is that it assumes the 100-year flood would be everywhere at its worst.

Such a worst-case make-up may be unrealistic, according to county Flood Engineer Don Nelson. Noting that to his knowledge downtown Mount Vernon has never had water in it in this century, he said the levee would probably break on the far side of the river before the 100-year flood waters got into Mount Vernon.

However, Dick Regan, hydrologic engineer with the Army Corps of Engineers, said downtown Mount Vernon would have water in it during a 100-year flood, regardless of what levees break.

In a past study, the Corps determined the downtown Mount Vernon levee would be the third most likely to break during a 100-year flood.

Some citizens at the recent public hearing were also concerned about the flood elevations designated for west Mount Vernon, figures that

the wide open spaces on the west side.

Regan admitted it's difficult to know where flood waters will go on the west side. He said

would require elevation of structures to as much as 13 feet.

One man, Lowell Hughes, noted any flood waters on the west side would dissipate over

depths would depend on how the levee broke. If it were a narrow break, he said, the depths near the levee would be close to those on the flood insurance map.

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