

# FEMA report threatens local development

By MARK MORROW  
Staff Writer

**MOUNT VERNON** — The numbers on density of development in the Skagit River flood plain have done a flip-flop.

Officials with the Federal Emergency Management Agency met various planners, engineers, and staff members from Skagit County last week and delivered the latest report on the Skagit River delta prepared by the engineering firm of Dames and Moore of Bethesda, Md.

In the report prepared for FEMA, Dames and Moore completely tumble the numbers on density in the flood plain which had been accepted by the Skagit County Flood Control Advisory Committee.

"Development density" is defined as "that portion of a lot that is raised above the 100-year flood elevation to accommodate new construction

or landscaping."

The county group had earlier recommended a development density plan which would allow development to take up no more than 75 percent of the land within the floodplain.

The new numbers from Dames and Moore would limit density to between five and 14 percent, depending on the flow path and the lot size. On the average, though, the development to non-development ratio would be 10/90.

This, in effect, would mean no more than 10 percent of the land could be elevated above the level of the 100-year flood.

Though the numbers are not final, local staffers who attended last week's meeting were staggered by the news.

"First of all, we don't know the boundaries yet. There's some talk of an urban set-aside. But

we've told them the 10 percent overall would break our backs," said Burlington City Supervisor Stan Kersey.

"This would have a tremendous negative impact," said Mount Vernon City Engineer John Wiseman. "I'm hopeful Mount Vernon can make some tradeoffs. Burlington is even more severely impacted. If this is enforced, it would just be intolerable."

If the numbers hold up, they'll have teeth because of the insurance angle. The area must abide by whatever formula is eventually adopted by FEMA in order to get flood insurance. And banks can't sell mortgages on the secondary market if they don't have the flood insurance, Wiseman said.

"Everybody was upset," Wiseman said. "It wasn't a reaction of outrage, but people were saying 'let's take another look at this.'"

John Norman, engineer who prepared the hydrology report in the draft environmental impact statement for the proposed Cascade Mall, said he hasn't seen the report from Dames and Moore yet, but doubted it would be enough to stop the mall.

He predicted that, if the numbers become final, the smaller percentages would apply to the smaller parcels of land. The mall could get by with a restriction of between 15 and 18 percent, Norman said.

"That would be fine. It's the building footprint itself (which counts)," he added.

The 65-acre site selected for the mall would only have buildings on about 15 percent of its surface, Norman said.

"It (the Dames and Moore report) is not an obstacle," Norman said.

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3-30-83 JMD