

Federal official says designated floodway best Gages option

BURLINGTON — Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) officials are considering turning Gages Slough into a designated floodway, a move that would strictly regulate development in the area.

FEMA official Chuck Steele told The Argus last week the designated floodway — an area set aside for the flow of 100-year flood waters — is the least confusing and “cleanest” solution to the lower Valley’s current problems with the federal flood insurance program.

By designating the Gages area a designated floodway, FEMA would be prohibiting any development that would increase the 100-year flood level in the area, which holds much of the future for Burlington development.

Steele said meeting this floodway development regulation would be very difficult.

To be in the federal flood insurance program the county and the cities in the lower Valley must create a floodway. In the past, however, officials have shied away from a designated floodway because of the difficulty of determining where the waters would travel in this large delta.

FEMA recently offered an alternative to the designated floodway: the limited density floodway.

The limited density floodway, recommended by FEMA’s Washington, D.C. consultants, would limit the density of development in the entire lower Valley floodplain to 10 percent of lot size.

But the county, cities and even FEMA officials knew this was unrealistic, so FEMA officials said they would revise the report.

One of the revisions being contemplated is this Gages floodway, Steele said. He noted the slough, an old channel of the Skagit River, is the most logical place for such zoning.

“The decision may well rest with local officials for the density or a floodway,” Steele told The Argus. “A lot who oppose the floodway will see it’s a lot cleaner way.”

A recent map issued by FEMA shows the areas in Burlington that will have less than one foot of water during a 100-year flood. The areas, shaded in green, are on either side of Gages Slough, creating a natural channel for floodwater.

Bill Spurlock, hydrologist with the Army Corps of Engineers, noted this situation in enhanced by the fact the levee system ends at the top of Burlington, near the point where this

natural “channel” starts.

According to Steele, the water FEMA is assuming would go into a Gages floodway would be only part of the 100-year flood flow.

In the same study that set out the controversial 10 percent limited density floodway idea, FEMA consultants predicted 130,000 cubic feet of water per second would split from the 100-year flow of 240,000 c.f.s. at Sterling and head through the area east of the interstate.

Steele said only part of this would go down the floodway.

However, Don Nelson, county flood control engineer, said a floodway in the lower Valley could only be designated if some structure, such as a soft spot in the dike, was built to deliberately divert the water.

Steele said that if FEMA designates a Gages floodway they would likely allow Burlington to increase the density of development elsewhere. However, the Gages floodway would not affect the density of development elsewhere in the county, he said.

Spurlock noted the question of a Gages floodway is twofold: hydrological and political.

The political ramifications are that many houses already dot the Gages Slough area — houses that would no doubt experience a decrease in value if their land would designated a floodway. Also, the Gages area is one of Burlington’s hopes of future development.

In a June 30, 1981 letter to Art Day of First Northwest Equities, former Burlington City Supervisor Robert Linrothe wrote: “The City of Burlington considers the development of South Garl Street as its future, prime commercial center.”

Noting the land in the Gages area is zoned commercial and industrial, City Planner Steve Ladd said that if FEMA designates a Gages floodway, the city will have to change its plans for the area.

Part of these plans include the third phase of the Burlington sewer extension, which will give service to Gages Slough south. The draft environmental impact statement for this extension states: “The proposed annexation and sewer extension would be an impetus to development which could impact Gages Slough.”

Ironically enough, the same DEIS also states: “Gages Slough also serves as a floodway in any flood event greater than 145,000 cfs.”