

New federal flood elevations for MV called 'workable'

By GALE FIEGE
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MOUNT VERNON — As it turns out, all the hoopla was worth it.

City Engineer John Wiseman said Tuesday that base flood elevation figures recently released by the Federal Emergency Management Agency are "workable."

When FEMA came to town last year, folks got excited. They didn't appreciate what they heard.

For example, FEMA officials tried to tell West Mount Vernon residents new construction there would have to be elevated more than 13 feet in order for the city to remain in the federal flood insurance program.

In a meeting with city officials and council members Tuesday, however, FEMA director Chuck

Steele presented base flood elevations that state flooding in the west part of the city may only reach three feet.

Other "horror stories" previously prepared by the Army Corps of Engineers described base flood elevations of up to nine feet in the downtown area, Steele said.

The base (or 100-year) flood elevations now listed on FEMA's flood plain map show a shallow one-foot sheet flow heading through the downtown area, Steele said.

Under Wiseman's direction, the city had appealed the original base flood elevation figures used by FEMA, and the meeting Tuesday evening followed several months of study by a private company revising Skagit County flood data.

FEMA formally will present its

new figures in January, and following a 90-day appeal period, will publish the final flood elevation levels in the Federal Register.

At that time, the city must rewrite its flood plain management ordinance in order for city residents and businesses to be eligible for the insurance through the regular federal flood insurance program.

If the city has not written such an ordinance by November 1984, it will be dropped from the program, Steele said.

After a detailed presentation by Steele, most councilman said the new figures wouldn't pose a problem when it comes time to refine the city's flood plain management ordinance.

Basically, the city must serve as a watchdog, making sure new

construction or substantial improvements have the lowest floor elevated to or above the 100-year flood levels published by FEMA.

Skagit County is preceded only by Cowlitz County in the number of insurance policies existing, Steele said.

"And that's because of Mount St. Helens, not because of the pure flooding you know and love," he said.

The recent FEMA flood insurance study of Skagit County sets insurance rates, provides the city with adequate data for its flood plain management program and allows the city to convert from "emergency" to the "regular" flood insurance program.

The emergency program means higher rates, Steele said.

The federal government wishes to replace the "disaster give-

away" by shifting the burden from general taxpayers to those wishing to live in flood hazard areas, he said.

About 313 flood insurance policy owners in Mount Vernon pay an average premium of nearly \$200 a year. Under the regular program guidelines, in which insurance is based on FEMA's flood insurance rate map, annual premiums could go as low as \$87, he said.

Steele cautioned the city against allowing variances from its flood plain management ordinance that would allow construction well below the base flood level. Annual premiums for buildings constructed under such a variance would go as high as \$9,000, he said.

The new flood study also lists reduced elevations in the River-

side Drive area. But the change is minor, and new construction in that area of the city must be elevated will up to an average of 30 feet.

If the Skagit River were to flood, the College Way-Riverside Drive area would act as a backwash pool, it was explained.

An original deadline of June 1, 1982, had been set by FEMA for the city to join the regular flood insurance program.

Angry protests by residents and city officials delayed action on a new flood plain management ordinance.

Following the city's successful appeal of Corps of Engineers' flood figures, the city passed standby ordinance that allowed the city to remain in the insurance program until revised figures had been released.