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Flood control hearing Wednesday Nookachamps opposition to latest plan

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MOUNT VERNON – Nookachamps area residents opposed to the latest Army Corps of Engineers proposals for Skagit River levee improvements promise they will flood a public meeting scheduled Wednesday night by the Corps.

Armed with a strongly-worded 8 page statement, Nookachamps hog farmer Larry Kunzler told the Skagit County Commissioners on Monday that a \$55 million flood control plan which would give urban areas of the valley protection from the highest predicted water in 100 years would back floodwaters into the Nookachamps area.

Higher levees downriver could mean an additional six inches to four feet of floodwater in the Nookachamps area, he charged.

Other upriver areas would also be flooded by restricting the flow around Mount Vernon and Burlington, he said.

As an alternative, Kunzler proposed that the much-maligned \$95 million Avon bypass be constructed to carry the floodwaters away to Padilla Bay.

Barbara Austin, another member of the group of 11 Nookachamps residents who confronted the commissioners Monday, said doing nothing until another solution is found would be better for her and her neighbors

than the dike improvements proposed by the Corps known as Alternative 3e.

“I do not feel that Alternative 3 is a fair and just answer to the flooding problems within Skagit Valley,” Kunzler said in his prepared statement. “I do not feel that the community of Skagit County as a whole has been given enough time to digest all of the pros and cons of Alternative 3, for unless your name is on the mailing list of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, chances are that you have not been informed of the impending meeting Wednesday night Dec. 20 at 7:30 at the courthouse.”

“And I obviously do not feel that all of the possible repercussions and impending lawsuits have been properly discussed by local, state and federal governmental officials,” he added.

Kunzler asked that the commissioners withdraw their support for the third alternative and hold another, better-publicized meeting at the Mount Vernon High School gymnasium in January “where a majority of Skagit Valley residents could attend, instead of just the special interest groups which are now influencing the decisions of our governmental leaders.”

Kunzler said the first public meeting held by the Corps was attended only by real estate interests.

When Congress deleted a clause which could have allowed construction of a flood containment dam on the Sauk River from legislation designating the Skagit as part of the nation's Wild and Scenic Rivers system, the valley's best chance at flood prevention went with it, according to Nookachamps dairy farmer and county planning commission member Ken Johnson. Around 40 percent of the Skagit's floodwater comes from the Sauk, he stated.

The Sauk flood containment dam clause was included in a version of the legislation introduced in the House by Rep. Lloyd Meeds (D-Everett) this fall, but was deleted by the Senate. On the final day of the session, the bill went to a House-Senate conference committee to iron out major differences between the two versions.

With time running out on them, the conference committee members accepted the Senate version as having the best chance for approval. The Senate version, without the Sauk dam clause, was passed and eventually signed by President Carter.

"Until about a month ago, I thought we would get flood prevention," Johnson told the commissioners. "But our great senator (Henry M. Jackson) has dropped the ball on the Sauk flood containment dam. Now we have no choice but to play catch-up."

"We can no longer fight for flood prevention", he stated. "We must now settle for flood protection."

But levee improvements now proposed by the Corps under Alternative 3e would improve flood protection in urban and some rural areas at the expense of those areas unprotected by dikes, he said. The Nookachamps, which engineers say acts as a natural "pressure valve" for flood waters, is not protected by dikes, Johnson pointed out.

"We will take the water nature gives us but we won't take the water that other dikes would give us," Johnson commented.

Johnson said although he had opposed the Avon bypass in the past, he now favors the plan.

The Avon bypass, first proposed in the 1930s, would take floodwater from the river at the Avon bend across the flats to Padilla Bay. In its journey across the flats, the bypass would cut across Highway 20 and numerous farms.

Recent public meetings on the bypass plan drew considerable opposition. County Public Works Director Gene Sampley commented, "It's my understanding the Corps got beat up pretty bad on the Avon bypass."

"The cost of \$70 to \$90 million was what worked against the bypass," commissioner Bud Norris recalled.

"No question, that's an expensive little ditch out there," Johnson replied. "That's why I had opposed it."

Commissioner Jerry Mansfield cautioned the Nookachamps group not to give up on a flood containment structure, adding that he would speak with Sen. Jackson about it later this week.

"The first presentation here today may have been overly dramatic," Mansfield said, referring to Kunzler's often emotional statement. "But I wish we would have been discussing this earlier."

Kunzler called the present flood control proposal "a fraud and a farce being perpetrated upon the good people of Skagit Valley" and charged that the dike improvements would be "literally throwing 55 million taxpayer dollars down the river."

"If you continue on this course of endorsing this ridiculous proposal, then

compensation is our only recourse,” he warned. Farmers should be compensated for construction additional mounds for their livestock during flooding, he said.

In addition, everyone living in areas adversely affected by the backwaters should be insured by the Emergency Flood Protection Act up to \$35,000, with the premiums paid by “those who receive the maximum benefit” of the plan, “namely the city of Mount Vernon,” he stated.

As Kunzler left the podium, commission chairman Howard Miller commented, “Those are some pretty strong words.”

Kunzler had said Miller, speaking for the board of commissioners, had endorsed Alternative 3 at a public meeting last spring. Miller said that he did not recall whether or not he had made such a statement.

But commissioner Bud Norris had another view.

“I can’t say that your statements are too harsh, Larry,” Norris responded. “I don’t see how a person could stay calm when he’s threatened with flooding.”

“I feel we owe it to you to reconsider and study the options to see if there might be another alternative,” he added.

“The only other alternative is dredging and you know they won’t let us do that,” Kunzler replied.

“It’s such a complex problem – we don’t have an answer either,” Johnson stated. “All we’re saying is that we’ve been overlooked.”