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Proposed levee on Skagit River. . . brings variety of opinions

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Kenny Johnson climbed the red spout of his clogged corn chopper and shook it.

"It's raining corn," said his wife, Gail, as she watched chunks of stalks somersault over the windshield of her truck.

The Johnsons own a dairy farm in the Nookachamps, a flood plain cut by the Skagit River about 10 miles northeast of Mount Vernon. Their 64-year-old house never has had water in it.

But a \$55 million levee project to protect Skagit Valley residents from floods will add more water to their fields and disrupt their lives.

County plans include building a levee on the north side of the Skagit River that will increase the overflow of the river into the Nookachamps basin.

Burlington residents will be able to walk on dry ground.

But the county will build mounds for Kenny Johnson's cows and raise the foundation of his house that has remained dry.

And all future buildings designed by Johnson will have to be 1 foot above the 100-year flood line.

"It's rather discouraging," Kenny Johnson said. "We don't feel levee protection is the answer."

But business owners in West Mount Vernon are enthusiastic about the levee project.

"I like the idea," said Wilma Murdock, part-owner of Westside Iron Works. "It's a good idea for here."

Murdock's building, which had water in it during the 1975 flood, will be in the first block west of the proposed northside levee.

Phyllis Fulton, part-owner of Fulton's Bike, also supports the project.

"We were sweating it out when the flood came last time," she said. "If it hadn't been for sand bagging, a lot of main street businesses would have suffered a terrific loss."

Skagit County administrators say the 53-mile stretch of levees will provide 50- to 100-year flood protection to the Skagit Valley and 500-year protection to Mount Vernon.

One proposed levee will begin west of Sedro-Woolley on the north side of the Skagit River and extend downstream along the river's north fork.

Another levee will begin on the south side of the river below the Burlington Northern bridge and extend along the south fork of the river. Additional levees will protect Fir Island, the area between the forks and Clear Lake.

The project will not proceed unless Skagit County voters are willing to pay the county's portion of the estimated cost. A proposition for a levee tax will be on the November ballot.

President Carter also must approve the \$10.8 billion energy and water appropriation bill for 1980. The bill contains \$1 million for the levee project. The \$1 million will be used to hire a consulting engineer.

If the project is approved, the levee project will be completed by about 1984.

"I don't think it's going to go through," said Dave Parker, owner of a grocery store in Clear Lake. "It's not fair for the tax payer in Anacortes."

Parker, who said he believes the project "is a necessity for Mount Vernon, said he would approve the tax for the levees."

But several residents outside Mount Vernon opposed the project or are undecided about how they would vote in November. Others said the valley needed more protection, not necessarily more levees.

"I won't support it if it increases property taxes," said Herb Watkin- ... part-owner of a shoe repair shop ... Burlington. "As far as I'm concerned, you can leave the river"

...

But a third fisherman under misty morning skies disagreed.

"I think they should have some protection," said Roy Sell, as he waded hip-deep in the river.

Sell said he helped sand bag the levee during the last flood.

Other residents who were not endangered by previous floods said they would vote for a levee tax.

"If they raised the levee, you bet I'd support it," said Jim Huff, who has lived in Burlington for 14 years.

"I haven't heard about the project, but I'd vote for a tax for flood protection," said Judy Newlin of Burlington.

But Orville Branson, a salesman for Lundquist Realty in Burlington, said he needed more information before he could vote.

He also represented an attitude reflected by numerous residents – he said he didn't want county residents to benefit from the project at the expense of others.

"If we're thinking about ourselves we'd be all right," he said. "But the county needs to protect the whole valley. If they can provide protection, then it's all right."

The Skagit River project, authorized in 1966, only recently included plans for protecting the Nookachamps and Clear Lake. Designs to raise foundation and build mounds were added in 1978.

"Because of our efforts, Clear Lake is getting 100-year flood protection," said Barbara Austin of the Nookachamps area.

Austin and about seven others, including Kenny Johnson, formed a committee to fight for protection. She said her house would have had almost 5 feet of water in it in a 100-year flood.

"Now, this area will never have bad floods," she added.

But Austin said she is not sure how she will vote in November because some questions of protection remain unanswered.

She said "one gray area" involves the construction of mounds and subsequent care of cows. Farmers may not be able to get their cows to milking facilities.

"If they don't get milked, cows will get sick and die," she said, anticipating that milking facilities would not be near the mounds. "What they need is what they should get."

And Johnson, even though the county will provide 100-year flood protection by raising his home, said he will vote against the measure.

“They (the county) won’t allow us to take a chance that the flood won’t happen again,” he said. “I say we can live with it. Leave things like they are.”

The Johnsons and many other Skagit County residents said they prefer building a dam on the Sauk River, which accounts for about 40 percent of the flood water.

But a Congressional designation of the Sauk-Suiattle river system as Wild and Scenic prohibits the construction of dams on the river.

Don Nelson, director of flood control for the county’s Public Works Department, said taming the Sauk would be too expensive and take too long.

The project would cost at least \$100 million and take 15 years, he added.

But one resident whose West Mount Vernon home along the river has sat in 4 feet of water was skeptical about any flood protection project.

“They’ve been talking about it so long,” said Andy Lilja, who will be forced to move if the project proceeds. “It doesn’t matter to me.”

He walked out to his bench by the river and held his dog, Bambi.

“It’s just me and the dog,” he said. “And we can live anywhere.”