

by John Draper

MOUNT VERNON — City councilmen have heard little from their constituents regarding Mount Vernon's struggles with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), but what they have heard has been negative toward FEMA.

FEMA officials recently investigated Mount Vernon's building practices, finding the city has not complied with

floodplain construction ordinances they established.

As a result, FEMA officials gave the city until June 1, 1982 to come up with a floodplain construction ordinance or be kicked out of the federal flood insurance program.

If the city is cut from the program, Mount Vernon citizens will not be able to get financing from federally-insured institutions, and all federal disaster assistance will dry up.

On the other hand, city Building Official Ron Maynock contends such an ordinance would drive up the cost of construction by making people build their houses above the 100-year flood level.

Despite these consequences, the public has had little to say, according to city councilmen interviewed by The Argus last week.

Without exception, the councilmen told The Argus few or none of their constituents have contacted them on the issue. Those who have spoken up have taken Maynock's view, they said.

Councilman Ray Reep said the constituents he's talked to have the conception that FEMA is acting like "the bully on the block," telling the local people how to build their houses.

Councilman Ron Torrence said he feels the reason the citizens have not been speaking up is that they don't fully understand the problem.

"Either way we go, it has drastic consequences for the valley," he said.

Chuck Steele, FEMA spokesman, said the citizens here have an incorrect concept of what FEMA is, adding that city officials are over-emphasizing the consequences of writing a floodplain construction ordinance.

He noted around 17,000 communities now participate in the federal flood insurance program and enforce ordinances similar to the one required of Mount Vernon. He said the only other place the

program has caused problems is in Kit-titas County.

Steele said the furor raised over writing an ordinance in Mount Vernon tells him "there has been a total lack of compliance with the program."

He pointed out Skagit County has a FEMA-type ordinance it now enforces and he said it has caused little controversy.

"If they were doing their job like the county, it would not be that big of a deal," he commented.

"When you're told a flood can come to a certain elevation and you build above that level, you're going to get wet," he said. "I don't know what in the world is more common sense."

He said he hasn't heard of any slowing of development in any of the communities that now enforce a FEMA-approved building ordinance. He admitted, though, that Mount Vernon and

Burlington present situations unlike others in the state.

Pointing out the effect of an ordinance on the economy is a backward focus, he claimed. He said people should be worried about the effect a large flood, like a 100-year flood, would have on the economy.

In a 100-year flood, which would carry around 270,000 cubic feet of water per second through the area, all businesses in the Burlington and Mount Vernon areas could conceivably suffer "severe loss," he said.

Over a 30-year period — the term of most mortgages — there is a 25 percent chance of a 100-year flood happening here.

FEMA statistics estimate that during a 100-year flood federal disaster aid in the millions is a certainty. This aid would be gone if Mount Vernon were taken out of the flood insurance program.

'They don't fully understand'

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insurance issue

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