

By KRISTIN HENSLEY
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MOUNT VERNON — "They're not only selling insurance, they're guaranteeing you're gonna collect it. They're going to turn the lights out in downtown Mount Vernon."

That statement by Civil Engineer Denny LeGro (referring to dike restrictions) represented the general feeling at last night's public hearing to consider proposed flood insurance regulations.

The meeting with Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) representatives was peppered with hostility and barbed remarks from Mount Vernon residents and businessmen who will be forced to modify building practices if the insurance program is adopted.

The public hearing follows negotiations between FEMA and Mount Vernon city officials, and is one of several scheduled to gather public opinion on whether the city should join the federal flood insurance program.

Mount Vernon is presently under the emergency phase of FEMA's insurance program, but must enter the regular program or be dropped altogether. Under the new program, construction in the flood plain will be regulated by ordinance and buildings must be elevated above the 100-year flood level. A deadline of July 1 has been set for the decision.

Citizen response to FEMA's demands was overwhelmingly one of denial last night. Only two individuals of about 100 who were in the audience voiced support for the program.

Major concerns were for the well-being of the Mount Vernon business district which lies in the designated flood plain. Local businessmen claimed the program regulations would stifle their businesses with unfair costs and provide an inadequate amount of insurance.

In West Mount Vernon, where the 100-year flood level is 13 feet above grade, Don Sichelsteel of Sichelsteel Cranes, Inc. thought he might have a distinct advantage over his neighboring businessmen if the city enters the program. He at least could lift his equipment into his new elevated building with his crane, he said.

But in order to elevate that building 13 feet, he would have to pay \$6,000 for each foot of fill, for a total of \$78,000. The building itself should only cost \$150,000, he said. Sichelsteel said he had researched the possibility of moving his business to another site, but expected to lose money because his property would be devalued as a result of the building requirements.

Other property owners expressed disgust about federal involvement in private affairs. Frank Nardo of Mount

Vernon argued that although federal representatives say the government does not "take" private land, they do tax it and regulate uses on it.

"It may be useless but it's your land," he said.

Another issue of great concern locally is the restriction on increasing the sizes of the dikes if the city enters the program. FEMA views dikes as encroachments which would raise the level of flood waters. As existing structures, they may not be raised under the new program, unless it is to the 100-year flood level.

Denny LeGro, past Mount Vernon City Engineer, said that if the city was not allowed to build up the dikes, flooding would be assured. The river bed is constantly filling up with layers of silt, raising the level of the water every year, he said.

LeGro echoed sentiment expressed by Jack Macauley, representing the Skagit County Board of Realtors. Macauley said the dikes are there to

Vernon to have water in it," he said. He was contradicted by an elderly resident who said that Mount Vernon was flooded in 1890, with nine feet of water in the downtown area.

Larry Kunzler, a Mount Vernon farmer, was one of the two flood insurance program supporters. He approached the speakers podium with 11 books on the flood insurance program and flood plain management.

"Until you have read or digested this information, it is my opinion that you are in no position to make a calculative, intelligent and informed decision (on whether to join the regular program)," he told Mount Vernon City Council members. He added Mount Vernon is the third most dangerous area in the county for floods.

The other supporter, a Mount Vernon resident who recently moved here from Hamilton because of the recent flooding in that town, said he felt the fears voiced last night were unfounded. He said had collected \$44,000 in just

confine the water in the river bed and that never increasing their size would contradict their original purpose.

"What he's (FEMA representative Carl Cook) suggesting is to force something round into a square hole," Macauley said.

Chuck Steele, deputy regional director of FEMA, countered by saying if the dikes were raised to the 100-year flood level, FEMA would have no argument. The area would then be flood-free, he said. And the dikes can be maintained, he said in answer to questions about breaks.

"I don't think there is an engineer alive who would say that (repairing the dike) would raise the level of floods. But there are grey areas between (raising and maintaining dikes)," he said.

Dike Commissioner (District 17) Earl Hansen called FEMA's 100-year flood elevations "unrealistic" and "blown out of proportion."

"I've never known downtown Mount

two claims from FEMA and had received an additional \$13,000 from the government when they bought his property and moved him to Mount Vernon. Even so, he said he still lost between \$20,000 and \$25,000.

"I found FEMA much more flexible after the ordinance (in Hamilton) was adopted than they are on paper," he said. "There are more concerns here about the pocketbook than there are about people. We lived in the garage, with five kids, from September to January because of the flooding."

Although the majority of the audience was not appeased by any information presented by FEMA last night, some questions did get answered.

Steele said that the FEMA study on flooding conditions in Mount Vernon did contain contributions from local sources, contrary to previous accusations. He said that FEMA had tried to implement Mount Vernon's "limited density" approach, and that represen-

Continued on Page 2

Angry residents

Continued from Page 1

tatives had been "extremely sensitive" to local feelings on the issue.

He also indicated that property values will not go down as a result of the flood plain designations, but may actually increase as they have in other communities. The only thing that would make them go down would be an actual flood, he said.

City Building Official Ron Maynock added that property values would also decrease as a result of the ordinance which would restrict uses.

In some cases, flood-proofing a commercial building instead of elevating it will meet FEMA standards, Cook said. Methods could include creating a "water-tight" building or "wet-flood-proofing" it. The latter method would be applicable on warehouse type structures where water would be allowed to pass freely through the building. The city would be required to issue a variance permit in those cases.

However, for residential structures, the only option is to elevate, he said.

Another public hearing on the issue will be held at a date to be announced.