

Small crowd expresses concerns to FEMA

By GALE FIEGE
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MOUNT VERNON — The arguments were not new.

A smaller crowd with the same concerns expressed in earlier sessions addressed the Mount Vernon City Council Thursday evening in the last of a series of public hearings regarding proposed federal flood insurance regulations.

The majority of the 25 people in attendance at Hillcrest Park Lodge told the council they were opposed to entering into the regular program offered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

As has been the case in past meetings, Larry Kunzler was the sole dissenting voice.

The city 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 would be regulated by ordinance and new buildings would have to be elevated above the 100-year flood level set nationally by FEMA.

A deadline of July 1 has been set for the decision and Mayor Ruth Gidlund said she expects the council to vote on the matter at its June 23 meeting.

If the city doesn't join the regular program, flood insurance would no longer be available for insurable property in the area and federal financial help would be severely limited.

However, according to Chuck Steele, deputy regional director of FEMA, public property such as roads and sewers could receive disaster aid.

A possible alternative may be that Mount Vernon would try to write its own flood insurance program. Steele said the province of British Columbia,

using some FEMA data, attempted to establish a self-insurance program, but later determined that it wouldn't work.

The only other city in the state that has voted not to go with flood insurance program is Pomeroy. Kittitas County had refused to draw up an ordinance to go along with FEMA and was dropped from the program. Soon after, public protest was so great that the county re-entered the program, Steele said.

Jack Sicklesteel told Steele and the council he knew of insurance companies that would offer private flood insurance.

Steele said he was unaware of any such insurance.

Sicklesteel also said he didn't believe preparing for a 100-year flood was any more realistic than planning for Mount Baker erupting or an earthquake.

"Don't try to out-guess God. If Baker blows, we'll be picking up the pieces in Puget Sound and we will be taking care of our own," he said.

Resident Zell Young said that although he was opposed to the city going with the FEMA insurance he was tired of people building in the flood plain.

"If people would build on floats, I would be all for it. But instead they go right to the bottom of the flood plain and then shout to Uncle Sam for help. Even the pioneers knew better than that. The federal government isn't going to continue to bail us out when we do stupid things like build on the flat bottom," he said.

Guy Fenimore told the crowd that if he were to have to build above the 100-year flood level at his property on the river that it would "wipe-out" any dreams of a retirement home there.