

Feds recommend strict regulations over development

By JOHN DRAPER

SKAGIT COUNTY — Officials from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) released information last week that will affect both the height and density of development in the Skagit River Delta.

In a report, "Analysis of Flooding in the Skagit River Delta Area," a Washington, D.C. consulting firm hired by FEMA revealed new 100-year flood elevations for the lower Valley.

The consultants also spelled out a recommendation that new development in the floodplain be restricted to 10 percent of lot size to allow the free flow of flood water.

Although both recommendations look like bad news for local cities and the county, officials here are saying that FEMA officials seem willing to compromise.

The new 100-year flood elevations are of keen interest in Mount Vernon, where a hot debate raged last year over their inclusion in the federal flood insurance program. A participating city must require all new or substantially improved construction be elevated above these levels.

John Wiseman, Mount Vernon city engineer, said the new elevations are reduced considerably on the West side and slightly in the downtown area. However, in the Riverside Drive area, the new elevations are the same or even higher than before.

The West side 100-year flood elevations, which were a bone of contention in last year's controversy, have gone anywhere from 9 to 13 feet above ground level to about three feet above ground level.

This would mean a structure would have to be elevated three feet above the ground to qualify for flood insurance — and therefore for financing from a federally-insured institution.

The downtown elevations have gone down on the average anywhere from 2 to 5 feet, Wiseman said. He explained the consultants figured these elevations by assuming the dike would break just at the bottom of the downtown area.

Downtown would then back-flood, he explained.

The Riverside elevations are essentially the same as before because the consultants assumed the area inside the big bend of the river would fill up like a lake, he said.

This creates a 100-year flood elevation of 33 feet mean sea level in the whole general area, he said.

Because of the dips and bumps in the ground elevation in the area, this would mean deeper water some places than others. For example, the two malls in Mount Vernon are at 30 feet mean sea level.

Mount Vernon building official Ron Maynock, one of several city officials who met with FEMA officials last week, said he thinks FEMA will compromise and lessen the flood elevations.

He claimed the city's outcry against FEMA and the previous elevations last year have made FEMA sit up and take notice of the wishes of Skagit County.

"If we had rolled over and played dead, where would we be?" he asked.

The consultants also recommended development in the lower Valley be limited to 10 percent of lot size. This "limited density floodway" approach fills the FEMA requirement that any area in the federal flood insurance program have a floodway, an area where the waters are known to run during a flood.

Because of the delta nature of the lower Valley, officials have shied away from creating a "designated floodway," a channel that will take flood waters.

The limited density approach assumes flood water could go anywhere and therefore restricts the density of development in the floodplain to allow the free flow of water.

Again, Skagit officials are saying FEMA will be flexible with this figure.

Maynock said the 10 percent density figure is absolutely unrealistic when it comes to small lots. For example, he pointed out this would mean a person who buys a \$100,000 parcel of land could only develop one-tenth of it.

When the limited density idea was first proposed by the Skagit County Flood Control Committee, they suggested allowing development on 75 percent of a lot.

Arnold Hansen, chairman of the subcommittee that recommended that density figure, said the figure was not scientifically determined. Rather, they looked at past studies of flooding here, he said.

Don Nelson, county flood engineer, guessed the 10 percent figure is a result of FEMA's conservatism.

"After all, they're in the insurance business," he said.

Nelson said both the limited density floodway and the designated floodway are equally ambiguous decisions.

FEMA officials have said they will meet again with city and county officials.

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