

Flood woes confound Burlington council

By MARK MORROW
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BURLINGTON — The Burlington City Council just doesn't understand the mixed signals it's getting these days from the state Department of Ecology and the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The council Thursday announced its intention of writing to the governor and President Reagan in an attempt to get the bureaucracy off the city's back.

FEMA officials are growing impatient with Burlington over the flood plain issue, while Burlington city officials say they've cooperated as well as they know how.

"This is a jurisdictional dispute," Councilman Neil Morrison complained.

Among the problems is the recent Flood Insurance Study sponsored by FEMA and adopted by the council. The study, conducted by the East Coast firm of Dames and Moore, proposed flood elevations substantially lower than those established in earlier studies by the Army Corps of Engineers and still accepted in practice by the DOE.

The city is ready and willing to issue building permits based on the new, lower flood elevations. However, the DOE only recognizes the older and higher elevations for purposes of issuing flood zone control permits.

As a result, the city's building department is in a jam, City Engineer Bob Boudinot said.

For some people seeking building and flood zone permits, the difference can mean as much as six feet in fill. For others, the changes could be between three and four feet. Boudinot said.

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"That can have an enormous impact on a building project," Boudinot said. "I have a lot of questions about how this is going to be accomplished. At this point, FEMA has dropped the whole thing in our lap."

If the city doesn't get more actively involved in the process, said Boudinot, "we could be swept away by these other agencies."

"How do we issue building permits?" Boudinot asked. "The flood zone control permits won't be processed."

City Planner Steve Ladd agreed the controversy and uncertainty have had a "dampening effect" on Burlington.

The city (and anyone else, for that matter) has until April 9 to appeal the Flood Insurance Study findings, and then another six

months to adopt an ordinance if it is to keep its flood insurance in good standing with federal officials.

City officials said the DOE is expected to appeal the FIS findings.

Boudinot said adoption of an ordinance will take "quite a few sessions" with the council.

"This is not something where the council can arrive at a decision without some study," he told them.

The recent study done by Dames and Moore "spread the risk" for flood damage, while the old Army Corps of Engineers study assumed the Skagit River dikes could break almost anywhere in the event of a major flood. As a result, the risk of damage is higher near the dikes, the 1974 Corps study concluded.

"There's no way to tell which assumption is correct. We're caught in the middle," Boudinot said.

However, Boudinot found no argument with last week's letter from FEMA official Brian Mrazik to Mayor Ray Henery in which Mrazik said FEMA recognized that most of the overbank flow would occur over Interstate 5 in the vicinity of the George Hopper Interchange between Gages Slough and the drive-in theater, and between Burlington-Edison High School and Cook Road.

Approximately 80 percent of the overbank flow would cross the highway at those points, FEMA said. Remaining flow would pass through Gages Slough and other drainages and road underpasses.

"It is FEMA's opinion that these types of areas should be kept free of fill and other obstructions or otherwise managed as floodways," Mrazik said.

However, city officials have refused to recognize Gages Slough officially as anything other than a "drainage area."

City officials said the DOE has agreed to assist in funding a study of Gages Slough.

Boudinot said he would urge the city council to read Mrazik's letter very carefully.

Yet FEMA supported the FIS findings and appears unwilling to spend the money it would take to provide completely new scientific data on base flood elevations — the sole basis for appeal on the FIS findings.

"If the federal government can't pay for it ... how can we pay for it?" City Supervisor Stan Kersey asked.

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