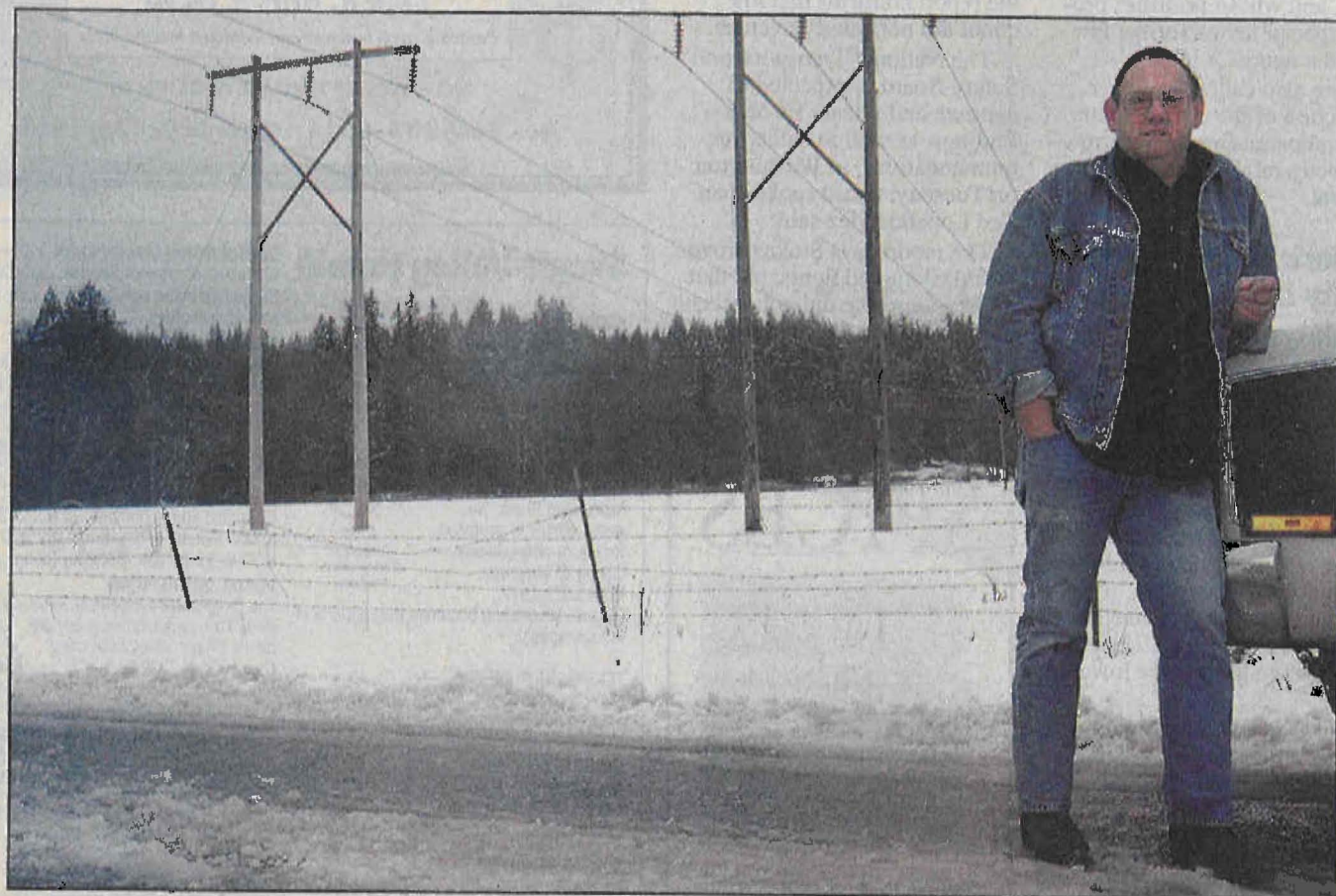


IN SEARCH OF DRY GROUND



Cara Eastwood / Skagit Valley Herald

Hamilton Mayor Tim Bates stands Wednesday near the property north of Hamilton he hopes will someday be the town's home. The town government wants to transfer development rights from the current flood-prone town site to this land, high above the Skagit River.

Town of Hamilton has had ongoing struggle with Skagit River

By JAMES GELUSO
Staff Writer

In 1897, Hamilton was flooded for the third time in four years. Fed up with the Skagit River, the residents of Hamilton picked up their town and moved it to higher ground.

Now, 105 years later, the town of Hamilton is on the move again.

There are differences, of course. Back then, moving the town meant putting the buildings on log rollers and dragging them uphill.

Today, it involves satisfying the state's Growth Management Act, acquiring property for a water supply and extinguishing development rights. And the process is taking a lot longer — 12 years and counting.

But Mayor Tim Bates can see the future of Hamilton on a 100-acre section of land, now vacant except for two sets of power lines running into the distance.

Covered by a blanket of snow Wednesday, the land seemed to be nothing special. But to Bates, it's flat, level and high enough that it won't flood.

It's a sharp contrast with the present town of Hamilton, where many homes' bottom floors are six feet above the ground, where large homes coexist with narrow manufactured homes, where dozens of people live near the Skagit River in recre-



People are allowed to live on mobile home parks in the southern part of Hamilton, close to the Skagit River. But when the river rises, as it did last month, residents have to be able to move their homes at a moment's notice.

ational vehicles and regard evacuation as routine.

The town now has about 330 residents, a far cry from the 1,500 or so during the boom times a century ago when lumber and mining fueled the town.

Since its founding in 1877, Hamilton has suffered at the whims of the Skagit River, but the town never has been killed. Bates spoke derisively of a Seattle-based TV news crew that pronounced the town dead during the 1995 flood, then came back and were surprised to be able to eat at the Hamilton Market's cafe just a few days later.

"Once the springtime comes, grass grows and bushes come back and everything's back in business," he

said.

Still, the inundation of about 70 homes in the 1990 flood prompted government officials from every level, from the town to the federal government, to get to work on a new future for Hamilton.

The ultimate plan was to move Hamilton north, across Highway 20, to higher ground.

It hasn't quite worked out that way. But there has been progress. The town's fire hall has been moved from the center of town to a higher location alongside Careys Creek, still south of Highway 20.

The town's new water supply, drawing from a well high above the town, is expected to begin working this summer. It was installed in a joint operation with

Crown Pacific, which needed the well for a possible lumber mill in Hamilton.

The next step, Bates said, is coming up with a place to move the town to.

The town planned to bring 160 acres into the town's urban growth area for eventual annexation. But that proposal was rejected in 1998 by the Western Washington Growth Management Hearings Board, which ruled that Hamilton had plenty of developable land — about 400 lots, more than enough to accommodate projected population growth in the town.

"So we're stuck here in the flood plain," said Bates.

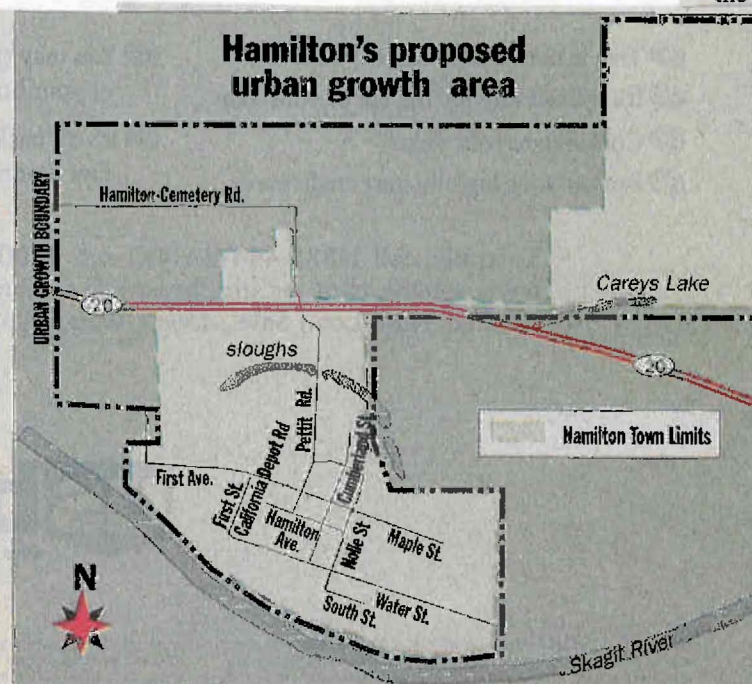
"The hearings board ignored the fact that they couldn't build down there," said Margaret Fleek. As Burlington's planning director, she also helps Hamilton under an agreement between the city and the town.

The 400 lots aren't developable because of the possibility of flooding, she said. But they still have legal development rights on them.

Fleek said she is working on an updated proposal that would clarify what the town is trying to do — eliminate the development rights on vacant lots in the current town in exchange for development rights in the new area.

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The Town of Hamilton plans to annex a large swath of land directly north of the present town for future expansion. The Western Washington Growth Management Hearings Board in 1998 said Hamilton couldn't have such a large urban growth area, but the town is working on a plan to convince the board otherwise.



Inside: A7

Like many towns across the West, Hamilton was once expected to become a great city. While it never lived up to the dreams of early boosters, perhaps the most amazing thing is the fact that it's still there, while other towns have disappeared.

Hamilton eyes possible shift north

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That wouldn't increase the town's capacity for growth, so it should satisfy the hearings board.

"I think this can work," Fleek said. "We'll prove that this is not a big land grab."

The development rights in the old town would have to be purchased, Bates said, and he has no idea how much that will cost. He hopes to receive aid from federal and state agencies that deal with flood relief and prevention, or from the Skagit County government.

The federal government already has been involved in Hamilton, buying 16 houses in 1980 and about 14 in 1990, said Mike Howard, a spokesman for the government.

Hamilton has gotten less help from the state, because its applications for grants just didn't make the cut, said Marty Best, spokesman for the emergency management department. In some cases, the applications were incomplete, he said.

Sitting in a booth at the Hamilton Market, which Bates owns, Bates spoke with a restrained optimism. He can't remember how long he's been mayor, he said, but trying to move the town has been an issue for the majority of his time in office since he was first elected to the Town Council in 1981.

The plan is not to force everyone in town to abandon their existing houses and move across Highway 20, Bates said. Instead, as houses are bought out and people move in and out of the town, they'll build new houses in the new northern part of the town. Bates even hopes to have sewer service installed on the new part of town someday.

Two areas already have been annexed. One area, directly north of town, is the Sutton Annexation. It already has been developed with several homes. The other area, northeast of town, is the Centennial Annexation, a large but hilly area owned by Concrete Nor'west, which plans a gravel mining operation.

The key land, according to Bates, is about 100 acres between those two annexations. The owners of the land told Bates they're willing to be annexed into the city, he said, if the growth board can be convinced to allow it.



Cara Eastwood / Skagit Valley Herald

Local residents and neighbors gather regularly at Willie's Hi-Lead Tavern in Hamilton to discuss current happenings.



Many residents opt to raise their homes to allow floodwater to wash under them, rather than through them. This home, owned by Duwayne and June Anderson, was raised in 1999 for about \$15,000.

But the plan depends on people moving. Given the choice, many residents have elevated their homes instead, raising them up and installing new foundations underneath to allow the river to flow around the houses without coming in.

When the Skagit River spilled into the town in 1990, about 70 homes were inundated, Bates said. In 1995, only about 20 homes were flooded. The difference, he said, was that the buildings had been raised.

It's more likely that residents will raise their existing homes than move across Highway 20, Bates said. And many local residents agree.

Tony and Jessica Osborn are buying a house that is in the floodway. They can see the marks from the 1995 flood, they said, and the previous owners told them the refrigerator was bouncing against the ceiling.

Still, living in Hamilton is worth the flood risk, they said as they talked with friends gathered around the bar at Willie's Hi-Lead Inn, the local tavern.

"I enjoy the area. It's quiet and peaceful up here," Tony Osborn said.

It's a comfortable area to live in, and a good place for children to grow up, he said. Even if he believed it was possible for the town to move, he'd rather ele-

vate his house.

"I don't think they'll ever move the town," said Norman Destremps. He owns a recreational vehicle park near the Skagit River, six lots, including the one he lives on. His tenants can only rent month-to-month and they have to have a way to move their trailer at a moment's notice because the river could invade the land so quickly.

"The town will never get put across the road. Never," he said.

Rosemary Richey, owner of the tavern, said she wouldn't move her business unless she were paid to. "Pay me what it's worth, and that's a lot," she said.

Hamilton could be changing drastically in the future. The gravel pit could provide up to 30 jobs, Bates said. And Crown Pacific's possible lumber mill would provide about 100 jobs starting at \$30,000 a year. Both of those projects would bring new money to the town, Bates said.

Even if nothing happens, if the pit and mill never open, if Hamilton never gets its new land, the town won't fade away, said Jim Bates, the mayor's father.

"This is an old, old town," he said. "That's why it's hard to destroy it."

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Great things were once expected of Hamilton

By JAMES GELUSO
Staff Writer

Hamilton once was touted as the "Pittsburgh of the West."

It was, according to local boosters and Seattle and New York newspapers, destined to be a great town, an economic engine fueled by coal and iron mining and logging, as well as a promised railroad.

But Hamilton faced hurdles to growth, and it couldn't overcome all of them.

The town began because of two mountains, Coal Mountain and Iron Mountain. Both are on the south side of the Skagit River and each is named for the precious minerals it contains.

But the coal was difficult to mine from a narrow vein and the iron was buried deep under rock. Those factors — as well as 10 years of lawsuits over ownership that kept mining from hitting its stride — hurt the town, according to Noel Bourasaw. He keeps an online history of the town at his Web site, (www.geocities.com/skagitjournalupriver).

In addition, the log jams on the Skagit River near Mount Vernon kept steamers from going up the river to Hamilton in the town's early days. That made transportation costs expensive, cutting into the profits of miners and loggers and making food and

"The wonderful story about it, of course, is that the town has survived all this time."

Area historian Noel Bourasaw

other supplies expensive, Bourasaw said.

But the promise of a railroad line coming across the Cascades through Hamilton to Anacortes kept the town strong, until 1893, when it was announced the line would go south toward Everett instead. That was followed by a nationwide economic collapse that killed many western boom towns.

"The three resources they had — the coal, the iron and the railroad — just kind of faded at the same time," Bourasaw said. Timber kept the town going, but the area was clear-cut by 1912.

And then, there was the Skagit River.

The original town site was platted in the 1880s, and is now under water. It was flooded in 1894, 1896 and 1897. In 1897, those buildings that weren't destroyed were moved on log rollers to the present site of

the town, which is still not immune to flooding either.

Still, the town didn't die. Even as Sedro-Woolley became the market center for the region, Hamilton persisted — until 1925.

"They had all the ingredients for a good frontier town, but the combination of the fire in 1925, and the automobile killed it off," Bourasaw said.

The fire started in the town's hardware store and wiped out nearly every business in town, leaving only the Hamilton Bank, which closed in 1943. (That bank became famous in 1944 when some would-be robbers blew the door off the bank only to discover it had been closed for a year and a half.)

The automobile was the final nail in the coffin, as people were able to get to Sedro-Woolley more easily, ending Hamilton's role as a smaller market center.

Of course, Hamilton isn't truly dead, not like the nearby towns of Cokedale and Bessemer.

"The wonderful story about it, of course, is that the town has survived all this time," Bourasaw said. "There are plenty of little towns up there that didn't survive for the same reasons."

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