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## Town may head for drier ground

By Warren Cornwall  
*Seattle Times staff reporter*

HAMILTON, Skagit County — It was 1951 when 11-year-old Barbara Dills saw her first flood. As the Skagit River filled the streets and homes of her town, she picnicked with friends out of the water's reach, giddy about the day off from school and a visit from a newspaper photographer.

Today, Dills is a grandmother. The river's restlessness is no longer a novelty. River silt still lingers in the crevices of her dining-room furniture a year and a half after the last flood.

"If it gets up like that again, I doubt we'll stay here," said Dills, as she sat in the tidy cream-colored house she and her husband bought in 1972.

Like her, Hamilton has grown tired of the ceaseless floods: of the siren that warns people to start moving furniture to the second floor, of the mud that coats kitchen floors, of the cleanup that never seems to end.

After more than a century withstanding the river's whims, leaders of this town of roughly 300, along with county, state and federal officials, are trying to deal with Hamilton's chronic flooding in a way never attempted before in Washington.

Hamilton wants to move.

Officials envision a new town that's a refuge for residents and for owners of flood-prone properties throughout Skagit County, one of the most flood-troubled counties in the state. People would move into new houses on higher ground, leaving behind their old homes to be torn down.

The former mining and timber town and the radical solution under consideration illustrate the problems posed by communities nationwide that flood again and again. And it underscores how the national flood-insurance program allows homeowners to stay in harm's way by repeatedly paying them to repair flood damage.

In Hamilton, "they have poured millions of dollars into that town for flood after flood after flood," said Margaret Fleek, planning director for the nearby city of Burlington and volunteer town planner for Hamilton.

Moving an entire town is complicated and costly. Even so, officials say, this is the best opportunity so far at giving a new start to Hamilton, more than a century after it was founded.

"I think it stands a better chance now because we've got more people interested in it," said Mayor Tim Bates. "If we don't, this town is going to die."

The flood of '03

As early as 1980, Hamilton's leaders toyed with moving to higher ground on the north side of the valley, shielded from the river by Highway 20. But each time the plans were overcome by the complexity, arguments over property and resistance from people attached to their homes.

Then came the flood of 2003. A string of October storms dumped nearly a foot of rain, sending the river surging over its bank to

the highest level ever recorded in the town. Water reached halfway up the walls of Bates' Hamilton Market & Deli in the center of town. The flood deposited mounds of trash in yards and inches of mud in homes. Drowned chickens rotted in trees and pens.

Dills' house, which had been raised to six feet off the ground in the wake of a 1990 flood, had a foot of water in the first floor.

The flood, beamed around the country on national news, caught the attention of government officials and revived local interest in finding a permanent solution. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the state Department of Ecology pledged \$67,000 for a consultant to help the town figure out how to move. Local officials formed a public-development authority to plan for moving the town. It met for the first time last month.

Here's how it might work: Residents willing to give their old home to the government would get the equivalent of a gift certificate to purchase property in the new town. The certificates would help offset the cost of their new home. Or residents could cash in the certificate and move elsewhere. In either case, the old homes would be torn down.

Early estimates put the cost of building the infrastructure for the new town, and buying the land, at about \$6 million. That doesn't include the cost of buying out residents now in the river's path.

Creating a new town of Hamilton could help break the cycle of flooding and rebuilding that keeps playing out in Skagit County, said County Commissioner Ted Anderson, who sits on the development authority's board.

Floods in Hamilton have cost government agencies at least \$10 million, say FEMA officials, who caution that is a very conservative estimate. The entire town is worth around \$15 million, according to the Skagit County assessor.

"As opposed to the federal government spending money repairing these houses over and over and over, we're going to go after some federal money so that we would have affordable housing," Anderson said.

### Successful moves

Just a handful of flooded towns have been successfully uprooted.

Valmeyer, Ill., was rebuilt on a bluff above the original town site after the Mississippi River flooded in 1993. Much of the old town of 900 was destroyed after sitting underwater for August and part of October.

Moving was a mammoth undertaking. State, federal and local governments spent \$33 million to build the new town and pay people for property they left behind. While residents got new homes, they also faced higher mortgage payments.

Nearly two-thirds of the original residents moved to the new town. It has since grown to 1,000, and is expected to reach 1,400, said Dennis Knobloch, who was mayor during the flood and reconstruction. Success, he said, hinged on the residents' commitment to rebuild.

"One of the keys is definitely finding out what the will of the people is," he said. "We didn't want to do this because FEMA or some other agency came in and told us this is what we should do."

Moving a whole town is the most extreme of government efforts to reduce the cost of flooding. But some argue the government's National Flood Insurance Program has exacerbated the problem by charging low rates and continuing to provide insurance to homes with a long, costly history of flood damage.

"It's like, if I'm a bad driver and I keep getting into accidents and my rates don't go up at all, I'm not going to do a lot to change my habits," said Martin Best, mitigation officer for the state of Washington's emergency-management division.

Congress changed the insurance program last year to raise rates for some property owners, but a lack of funding has slowed the changes.

Since 1978, properties with persistent flooding problems in Washington have received one-third of all flood-insurance payouts in the state. But they represent fewer than 2 percent of all the flood-insurance policies.

In some cases, FEMA has paid out more in repeated claims than the property is worth.

## A flooded history

Flooding has marked life in Hamilton since its inception in the 1870s. It's as much a part of the town's identity as the squat, cinderblock building that houses the Hamilton Market, where people can stop for gossip and a cup of coffee.

Tales of floods pepper the town's official history book. An 1896 photo of downtown shows huge logs deposited on the street by a flood, near the caved-in wall of a two-story building.

Today, signs stating "Flood Line" are scattered about town, including on a tree, the liquor store and the wall above diners at the market, marking the water line from the 2003 flood. They were put there by the county after the flood, to illustrate the damage to visiting politicians.

"I never did take them down," Bates said. "I thought, 'What the hell. Conversation piece.' "

By the time Barbara Dills moved here from North Carolina in 1948, the iron and coal mines that first drove the town's development had given way to logging.

The highway up the Skagit Valley ran through the center of town, drawing traffic and business. At the main intersection, a logging company office, two saloons and a restaurant faced each other.

Dills went to school in a two-story brick building and bought pencils and paper in the general store across the street. She went roller skating with friends at a skating rink a few blocks away. She met her husband, Gordon, while she was a waitress at the Paul Bunyan restaurant, known for its steak dinners.

Then Highway 20 was built, detouring around town. Now there's little more than a road sign alerting drivers to Hamilton's existence. The town's main employer, a timber outfit once bustling with fresh-cut logs, faded away.

Today, a huge expanse of weed-covered dirt and a few shuttered buildings are all that's left of the company. The restaurant is gone, replaced by the Hamilton Market. The skating rink has vanished, along with the general store, the adjoining gas station and nearly every other business in town. The only survivors are a tavern, a liquor store, a post office and the market, clustered around a single intersection. The school was torn down in the 1970s and sold for bricks.

The relentless floods worsened the toll. Residents can tick off the big ones. There was 1990, when it flooded on Veterans Day. Before anyone had time to shovel the muck from their homes, the river returned on Thanksgiving. It flooded again in 1995. Then came the 2003 deluge.

Each time, a few more neighbors left for high ground. Down the street from city hall, an abandoned, flood-wrecked home sits in decay. Empty lots where houses once stood checker the town, the legacy of FEMA's program to buy flooded properties.

The city struggles to collect enough property taxes because the government — which pays no taxes — now owns so much land there. Sidewalks have crumbled or vanished beneath the grass.

The town has become a magnet for low-cost mobile homes and rentals. The poverty rate in 2000 was 23 percent, twice Skagit County's overall poverty rate, according to the U.S. Census.

"People move here because they can't afford to live anywhere else," said Anderson, whose county-commission district includes Hamilton.

## Hard to leave

Dills has thought about leaving Hamilton for good. She looked in Concrete, Burlington and Sedro-Woolley but couldn't find anything affordable. Even though she thinks moving the town is a good idea, she's undecided about moving with it. She worries her family would wind up with a house "punched in" between other houses. Now, their home is flanked by a sprawling lawn on one

side and a marsh on the other.

"It's really strange how a person gets attached to a home and a place. I can't figure out why. We take trips and I can't wait to get back home," said Dills, who serves on the Town Council.

Her son, Tom, and daughter-in-law, Susan, live a few blocks away in a home that flooded in 1990. They raised the house, but not high enough for 2003. Still, they stay.

"Nobody bothers us here. We have a lot of privacy. We have our home," said Susan Dills, who runs the post office.

She would consider moving to the new town, she said. But they would need to get a similar piece of property.

Most of the time, Barbara Dills approaches the floods with a matter-of-fact attitude. She just finished stripping the water-damaged wallpaper from her dining-room walls. Coat the walls with paint that kills mildew and it should be fine, she says.

"You can get it clean if you're ready to work."

Still, the flooding comes at a price. The roughly \$80,000 they have received from the flood insurance over the years hasn't covered the cost of raising the house foundation and replacing all the damaged goods, Barbara Dills said. They have spent countless hours doing much of the cleaning themselves. The first time the house flooded, one of her sons brought her back to the house in a boat. She stood in the front hall in knee-high boots and cried.

Earlier deal fell through

Up on the other side of Highway 20, Sherry Lawson has never seen a flood touch her 47 acres. She watches the familiar ritual of flood preparations. Hamilton residents park their cars on the road next to her pastureland.

Now Hamilton is eyeing Lawson's land as a place to park their town. Lawson has heard it before. She negotiated with the city in 1990 over a possible land deal but she said she grew tired of waiting and pulled out. Last year, she heard from the city again. She's willing to consider an offer "as long as it's worth our while."

Chuck Steele has watched the town flirt with moving for decades. As the former head of flood-

mitigation efforts for FEMA's regional office, he was in Hamilton after the 1980 flood when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers asked if residents wanted to relocate the town.

"The corps just about got run out of town on a rail," said Steele, who now deals with flooding in the area for the state Department of Ecology.

This time city leaders seem committed to the idea of moving, Steele said. And they have backing from other government agencies. If the city can find the money to buy the land and lay the sewer lines, roads and power lines, he predicted the town could carry it off. Not by moving all at once, but gradually, as future floods damage homes and wear away at the old town of Hamilton

"This is not the first time," he said of the attempted move. "But this is the best hope."

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