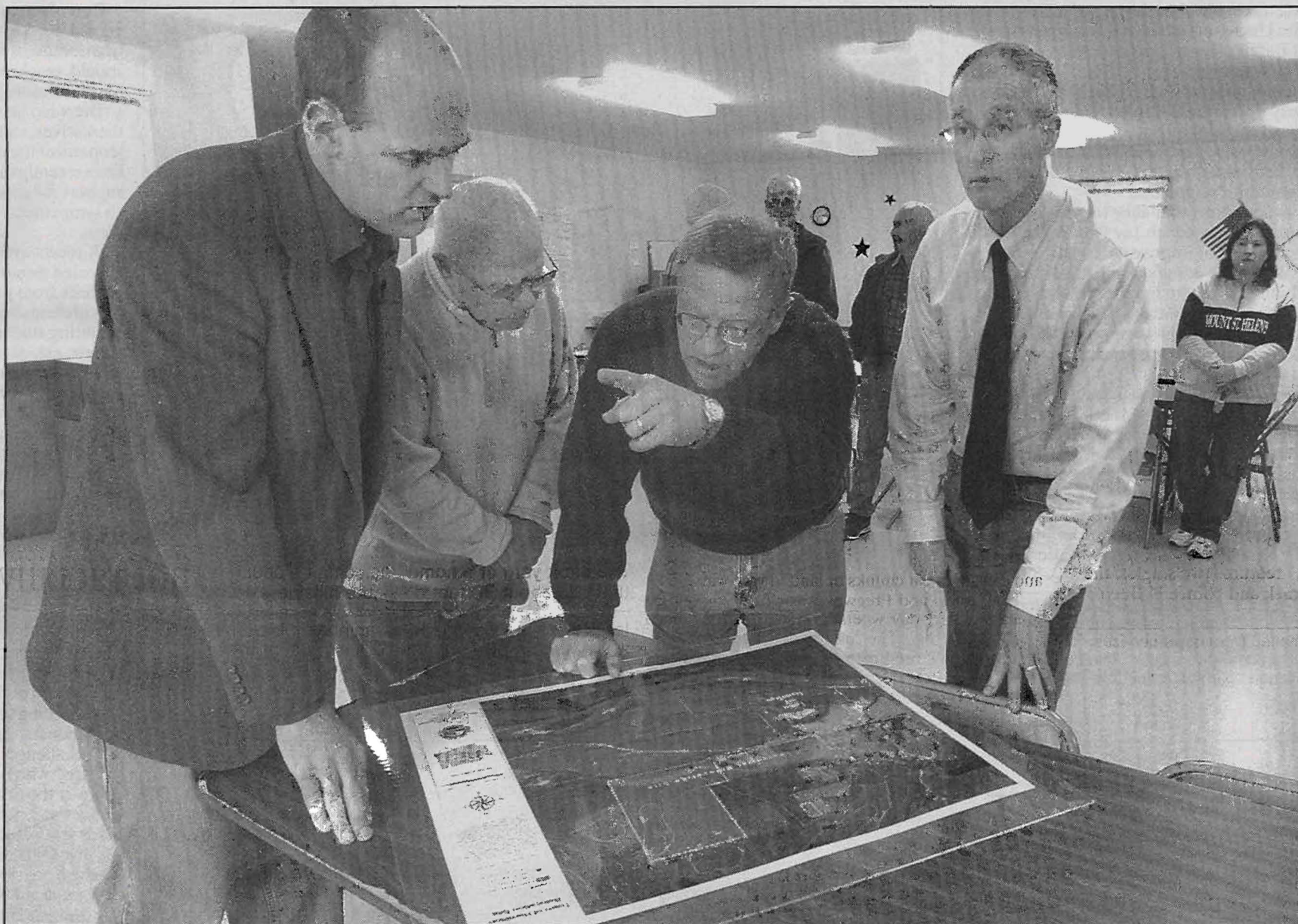


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"This effort needs a lot of flexibility. It's going to take time and money — maybe a couple more floods — before it finally happens."

U.S. Rep. Rick Larsen



Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald

(From left) Congressman Rick Larsen examines a map of the Hamilton area and discusses plans to move the flood-prone town with Hamilton Town Council member Andy Hansen, First Baptist Church Pastor Ron Edwards and Skagit County Public Works Director Chal Martin.

Hamilton's future discussed

By BEVERLY CRICHFIELD
Staff Writer

HAMILTON - When U.S. Rep. Rick Larsen last toured First Baptist Church a year-and-a-half ago, throngs of people huddled inside looking for a place to stay while waiting anxiously for the raging floodwaters to subside.

For Larsen, the damage, health hazard and hopelessness left in the wake of the high water drove home the need for a permanent solution to Hamilton's ongoing flood woes.

That solution will likely mean moving the town and its residents north of Highway 20 onto higher ground, Larsen said.

"My goal is to get the ball rolling so quickly that nothing can stop it," Larsen said. "I've told my people that this is a priority for upriver."

Larsen visited the First Baptist Church on Tuesday afternoon to talk with Skagit County Public Works crews about plans to move the town.

Hamilton was just one of the stops scheduled during Larsen's weeklong legislative tour.

At the church, Larsen met with Pastor Ron Edwards to discuss plans by community organizations to provide permanent emergency relief and education assistance to area residents.

Church and community groups have begun laying the foundations for a permanent food bank and community center on church property. Eventually, they hope to provide donated clothing, furniture, socializing, some classes and an American

At a glance

■ **What:** Public meeting of the Hamilton Public Development Authority to discuss the continuing project to relocate Hamilton out of the floodway.

■ **When:** 2 p.m. Tuesday, March 15.

■ **Where:** Skagit County Commissioners hearing room, 1800 Continental Place, Mount Vernon.

Red Cross shelter in the center.

Church officials say they are tapping into local grants to purchase buildings, possibly old mobile homes, to use for the community center.

Their proposal would be an interim measure until the town can be moved and a more permanent community center can be built, Edwards said.

During the October 2003 flood, the church opened a food, clothing and furniture distribution site in a building at the vacant Crown Pacific tree farm. The volunteer-run distribution site, called Good News Depot, has continued to stay open once a week from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

While the floodwaters have long subsided, the ongoing need for assistance has not, church officials say.

"The flood uncovered the real problem," Edwards told Larsen, while standing outside of the church Tuesday. "There's a lot of extreme poverty here."

Many of the residents can't afford a home or rent in more urban areas, including Burlington, Mount Vernon and Sedro-Woolley, Edwards said.

So, they suffer through floods, lose most of their possessions, and then return to the same low-lying area, he said.

Hamilton's Town Council voted last October to create a public development authority (PDA) to oversee a long-term moving plan, find money, buy land for about 200 homes and handle grant applications for assistance.

Efforts are under way to put together a governing board for the PDA. So far, five of nine positions have been filled, said Chal Martin, Skagit County Public Works director.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency last year awarded Hamilton \$66,000 to kick-start a planning process and hire a consultant, and another \$295,000 to buy out homes and property that routinely flood.

But years could pass before the plan is approved and a new town constructed, Larsen said. Money isn't easy to come by, and the process involves at least a dozen federal, state, and local governments and agencies, he said.

"This effort needs a lot of flexibility," Larsen said. "It's going to take time and money — maybe a couple more floods — before it finally happens."

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