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Flood Solution on Horizon?

Decades-old plan to divert the Skagit River resurfaces

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In 1922, an engineer suggested building a trench to drain water from the Skagit River when it flooded.

That project never happened. But now, it just might.

Skagit County, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and a host of other agencies, tribes and interest groups are pushing ahead with work on a project that would protect area cities and farms from up to a 100-year flood.

The project, as suggested in 1922 and approved by Congress in 1936, was called the Avon Bypass. The rock-lined trench would stretch from near the railroad bridge between Burlington and Mount Vernon to the Swinomish Channel. The price, in 1936, was estimated at $1.8 million.

The Avon Bypass is now called the Swinomish Diversion, but the concept is the same. It would be a 2,000-foot-wide swath of land with dikes on either side, reaching from the bend in the Skagit River, just west of Interstate 5, to the Swinomish Channel. It might follow Highway 20 for much of its length – in fact, the highway could be rebuilt on top of one of the dikes.

Rather than a rocky trench, the channel would be a wide, grass-lined depression. Gazebos and ball fields would allow it to be used for recreation during the dry season, and a constant small stream would provide habitat for young salmon.

And when the Skagit River threatened to spill its banks, the floodgates would be opened, sending water spilling down to Padilla Bay. The bypass could absorb the water from a 100-year flood, which otherwise would submerge Burlington, much of western Mount Vernon and nearly all the land between those cities and the Swinomish Channel.

The price, in 2001, is estimated at $225 million.

Changing times

Ken Dahlstedt thinks it's worth it. In fact, it would be a bargain at twice the price, the Skagit County commissioner said. As long as the project costs less than $650 million, the amount of damage that could be done in a few decades of floods, the benefits will outweigh the costs.

Dahlstedt's father, Norman Dahlstedt, opposed the project in 1964. The project might have cut across the southern end of his fields on Farm-to-Market Road. There just weren't enough people in Skagit County at the time, he said. The tax burden on each individual would have been huge.

But the circumstances are different now, said Ken Dahlstedt.

In the 1960s, agriculture was more viable and the project would eat up significant farmland. Today there's an excess of farmland available, so purchasing the land could be cheaper, at least in inflation-adjusted

dollars. And taking the land out of agriculture would have less impact on the local economy than it would have back then.

In addition, the need to restore salmon populations means it's easier to come up with the money. By adding a salmon-restoration component, other state and federal agencies become interested.

"The potential for this being funded is probably now the greatest that it has even been," Dahlstedt said.

The memory of the 1990 and 1995 floods, which destroyed a couple dozen homes and submerged thousands of acres of land, is still fresh. That makes politicians today more willing to spend the tax dollars the project will require, he said, while past commissioners have been put off by the price.

The floods in 1990 and 1995, while devastating, were merely 35-year floods. A 100-year flood would have about 50 percent more water, enough to break through or over many more dikes.

"I think it's time to stop spending money on studies and start spending money on flood control," Dahlstedt said. "I don't want to be the commissioner that has to go tell families why they lost their house."

Two options endorsed

The Swinomish Diversion is one of two alternatives endorsed last week by the county's Flood Risk Management Working Group. The group, a panel of representatives from cities, the agriculture community, dike districts and state and federal agencies, hashed out differences in monthly meetings over the last year. It concluded with two preferred alternatives – the diversion and levee setbacks.

Levee setbacks could widen the river channel, now typically about 850 feet wide, another 1,000 feet. With some additional excavation, that would be enough to contain a 100-year flood.

Such a move would require purchasing massive amounts of land, much of it already developed, along the river. But it would allow the river the room it needs to spread out in the amount of such a massive flood.

Many questions are unanswered about how that would work, and no point was stickier for the group than the question of riprap. Dike district commissioners insist that the large rocks remain in the river to protect the dikes from erosion. The staff of natural resource agencies such as the state Department of Fish and Wildlife want it removed, because riprap makes poor salmon habitat.

The tension grew so great that pro-riprap forces implied the environmentalists were willing to risk human lives for better salmon habitat. The other side insisted that wasn't the case.

Widening the channel by moving the dikes would cost about $280 million, of which $108 million would have to be paid locally, according to Stephen Pierce of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The group didn't recommend that the diversion or setbacks be built, only that they be studied in detail. No project got the unanimous approval of everyone on the panel. Rather, these were the projects with the fewest serious objections.

"We're going to get beat up for whatever we decide here," said Dave Hedlin, a farmer and member of the group.

The group's recommendation is expected to go to the county commissioners on July 9. If the trio approve the recommendations, the Corps of Engineers will begin the environmental impact statement, which will examine what will happen if either project is built – or if nothing is done. The document also will include 35 percent of the design work on each project.

The plan, according to Jackie Vander Veen, the county's project coordinator, is to finish the environmental impact statement by April 2003. That should be in time to get the project authorized by Congress in 2004, with construction possibly beginning in 2006.

"This is a very optimistic schedule," Vander Veen said.

Complexity increases cost

The Avon Bypass might have been built long ago if not for the cost.

In the 1930s the Corps of Engineers was uninterested in stopping floods just for the sake of protecting the locals. It judged the project unworthy of federal funding because not enough boats used the Skagit River.

When interested in the project was revived in 1962, the project was estimated to cost $19 million, of which $4 million would be paid by the county. Still, the project was criticized locally as being too expensive as opposed to dredging the river.

The 1960s version was different from both the 1920s proposal and the modern vision. In the 1920s, it was simply a rock-lined trench. In the 1960s, it was to have been an eight-mile-long lake. Today, the idea is for a stream that would tie into the sloughs near Padilla Bay.

Even after adjusting for inflation, the projects costs more than it would have in the past because public works projects are much more complex. The studies that precede construction today are much more detailed, and projects have to work around wildlife issues with more care than before.

One potential snag that could kill a diversion project is the eelgrass bed in Padilla Bay. Having floodwater come rushing into Padilla Bay, full of silt and debris, could damage the beds, which provide habitat for Dungeness crab, herring and many other species. The county has retained an eelgrass expert to examine the effects of the bypass on the beds, but the answer to that question is months away.

The local Indian tribes support the project, according to Larry Wasserman of the Skagit Systems Cooperative. There may be minor impacts on salmon, he said, but there are large benefits that outweigh them.

A major unresolved question is exactly where the channel will go. The flood group had considered two alternatives – one that follows Highway 20 and one that heads straight west from the river. But in the end, the group lumped them together as simply a diversion concept, without a specific alignment other than south of Highway 20. That leaves many possibilities open and keeps people from hurriedly buying land in the path of the bypass.

The idea of linking Highway 20 to the diversion channel is popular with county officials, but is unlikely, according to Todd Harrison of the state Department of Transportation. It's just unlikely that the bypass and the dikes can be built with all the bridges that will be needed on the highway.

Even if the diversion is built, the Skagit River probably still would have to be widened in the area of the Interstate 5 bridge, Vander Veen said, because it is such a choking point for water coming down the river. The Riverside Bridge replacement, currently under construction, will be long enough to accommodate that, but the Burlington Northern Railroad Bridge probably would have to be replaced, she said.

Whatever the result of the impact statement, the project is sure to generate debate as local governments and the public discuss which project should be built. But county officials are sure something will happen.

"I think the people here want to see a flood-control project," said Vander Veen. "I think they want one bad."

Dahlstedt agreed.

"It's time we stop talking and stop studying and do something."