



Posted on Sun, Feb. 03, 2008

No way out of this sales tax

The metro-east faces up to \$180 million in Mississippi River levee repairs -- repairs that have to be made quickly so the levees will meet new, more stringent federal safety standards.

In fairness, the federal government should pay the bulk of the costs. After all, they set the higher standards. Plus, this is the sort of infrastructure project existing tax dollars should be used to fund, not bridges to nowhere.

But the reality is, the check from Uncle Sam won't arrive anytime soon, if at all. Although the federal government says it will pay at least 65 percent of the tab, far too little money is set aside for this type of work. Communities wait in line for years for federal reimbursement.

We don't have years to wait. Beyond the risk of a levee breach and serious flooding, our area has to worry about serious economic damage. Developers aren't going to want to build in the flood plain; homeowners and businesses aren't going to want to locate there until they're confident the upgrade will happen.

And so the alternative seems to be the 1/4-cent sales tax increase that state Sen. Bill Haine just introduced. It would spread the burden throughout Madison, Monroe and St. Clair counties, which is fair. The region's well-being is at stake, not just the area along the river.

The politicians promise this tax will go away once the work is finished, in 20 years or less. Unfortunately, politicians have a bad habit of making temporary taxes permanent. But again, there's not much to do but trust them this time.

Monroe County Board Chairman Dale Haudrich said he's not sold on the sales tax increase -- but admits he doesn't have a better idea. Unless he can come up with one, he needs to support this plan. Work needs to begin in the next few months.

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Posted on Sun, Feb. 10, 2008

Levee repair: Metro-east faces major challenge

From Alton to Columbia, flood plain protection needs to be brought up to date

BY BRIAN BRUEGGEMANN
News-Democrat

They protect many millions of dollars in property and more than 150,000 lives.

Though they may look like nothing more than mounds of earth, the metro-east's levees are intricate and important. And experts say they're not up-to-snuff, that they need repairs that could cost up to \$180 million.

So how do they work? Where are they? And, most importantly, what's wrong with them?

The metro-east has five levee districts: Wood River, Chain of Rocks, Metro East, Prairie Du Pont and Fish Lake. The Chain of Rocks district is owned by the federal government; the rest are owned by local levee districts that were established in the early 1900s.

The levees, which stretch almost continuously from Alton to Columbia, protect more than 250 square miles in an area called the American Bottoms flood plain. The five systems have about 83 miles of levees. They are essentially intertwined in a single levee system, because a problem at any point would affect the whole area.

Urban levees are built high to protect cities against major floods. For stability, they are pyramid-shaped, with the bottom much wider than the top.

The local levees are designed to hold water until the Mississippi River stage reaches 52 feet. During the flooding of 1993, the river stage reached 49.6 feet, a record.

When the river stage reaches 50.6 feet, that is considered a 500-year flood, one of such magnitude that its odds of happening are 0.2 percent in any given year. By comparison, when the river stage reaches 46.1 feet, that is considered a 100-year flood, one that has a 1 percent chance of happening in any year.

What's the problem?

The main problem is underseepage. Underseepage is water that travels under a levee and makes it unstable.

Underseepage causes sand boils -- sand bubbling up from the ground on the inland side of the levee. If a sand boil is left unchecked, it can deteriorate the levee and cause a nightmare: a levee break.

"You don't want sand boils," said Alan Dooley, a spokesman for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which monitors flooding risks. "Sand boils are bad."

To combat sand boils, workers put rings of sand bags around them. The weight of the water inside the ring of sand bags is intended to hold back the water that is boiling up.

During the flood of 1993, all of the levee districts required the placement of sand bags in various areas because of underseepage. Levees that require that type of emergency sand-bagging during a 100-year flood will be declared inadequate under new guidelines from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

So when preliminary flood-zone maps for the metro-east are issued this year, the entire American Bottoms flood plain is expected to be in a flood hazard area. The maps become official in 2009.

If the area is declared to be in a flood hazard zone, people would need to get costly flood insurance in order to get a mortgage. But if plans are in place to repair the levees, the region could apply for a special status that would greatly reduce the cost of flood insurance.

What's the fix?

There are two main ways to fix underseepage. One way is to build large sand-and-dirt berms on the inland side of the levee. The extra pressure and weight of the sand and dirt prevent sand boils.

The Corps is already doing that at the Chain of Rocks levee. The agency is spending about \$46 million to add berms along that levee and make other improvements, such as adding a water-pumping station. The project is expected to last another five years.

Another tool for addressing underseepage is relief wells. Relief wells allow water to get out from beneath the levee without causing erosion.

Some of the pipes used in the levees' existing relief wells are in bad shape, and more relief wells are needed.

What's the cost?

The East-West Gateway Council of Governments, which is helping local levee districts and governments address the problem, estimates the repairs will cost anywhere from \$136 million to \$180 million.

The Gateway Council also estimates the local levee districts and governments will have to shell out \$31 million to \$47 million in order to get federal funding to cover the rest of the cost.

Of the locally-owned districts, Metro East and Wood River are the large ones. Combined, their repairs are estimated to cost up to \$82 million.

State Sen. Bill Haine, D-Alton, on Wednesday submitted a bill providing for a temporary quarter-cent sales tax to fund levee repair -- and storm water drainage improvements.

Haine's legislation would allow Madison, St. Clair and Monroe counties to impose the tax. He said use of the revenue for flooding and other water-related issues is a secondary function.

Also, leaders in St. Clair, Madison and Monroe counties have chosen representatives to serve on a task force that will study how to repair the region's Mississippi River levees.

The Metro East Levee District's annual revenue is about \$3.68 million, and it has a stash of about \$4.2 million that is potentially available for the repairs. Metro East will need about \$14 million in matching funds, according to the Gateway Council.

The Wood River District can increase its revenue from property taxes by showing a Madison County judge that a tax increase is necessary. The Wood River District already has done that. The district asked that its annual tax levy be increased from \$402,000 to \$915,000. A judge recently approved the increase. A homeowner who pays about \$12 annually for the levee district's property tax will now pay about \$24 per year.

The Wood River District already has about \$1.28 million on hand that could be used toward the estimated \$4.1 million it needs in matching funds.

The Prairie Du Pont and Fish Lake districts are different stories. Together, their annual revenue is about \$450,000, and they have about \$750,000 in reserves.

The costs of repairs at Prairie Du Pont and Fish Lake are estimated at anywhere between \$20 million and \$52 million. The two districts will need an estimated \$7 million to \$17

million in matching funds.

But the Prairie Du Pont and Fish Lake districts are much smaller than Metro East and Wood River, and have much lower property values. That limits how much the two small districts can generate in taxes.

Buying more time?

A legislative measure introduced by Reps. Jerry Costello, D-Belleville, and John Shimkus, R-Collinsville, would give the metro-east more time to make levee repairs before the area is declared a flood hazard zone. The proposal calls for the metro-east to be put on the same remapping schedule as Missouri, which is expected to have its new flood maps finished in 2010 or 2011.

The measure is an amendment to House Resolution 3121, the Flood Insurance Reform and Modernization Act of 2007. The resolution has been approved by the House and is awaiting action in the Senate.

Christina Mulka, a spokeswoman for U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Springfield, said, "We believe the bill as a whole is an important piece of legislation," Mulka said. "We're going to do what we can to see that it gets passed."

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Posted on Wed, Feb. 20, 2008

Fighting floods and politics

Flood control has been an issue near and dear to Madison County Board member Helen Hawkins since the late 1960s, when she pushed -- and eventually got -- improvements for the Dobrey Slough.

Now Hawkins wants to help upgrade the Mississippi River levees and help prevent floods. She has been vigorously lobbying to be appointed to the vacant seat on the Metro East Sanitary and Levee District.

But today the Madison County Board is expected to appoint County Board Chairman Alan Dunstan's choice for the seat, County Board member and county Democratic Party insider Frank Laub. Hawkins asked to address her colleagues prior the vote, but that request was denied.

It's all just a reminder of how political the Metro East Sanitary and Levee Board is, and why the public should be concerned about that going forward. For years the board's priority has been political patronage jobs. Even the urgent need to fix the levees doesn't seem to be changing those priorities.

Some people want to see the five separate levee districts we now have combined into one. At a minimum, levee operations need to be more professional and less political. The taxpayers are going to spend an estimated \$180 million upgrading the levees. The public needs to know that they will be adequately maintained.

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When the levees break

Thursday, Feb. 21 2008

Any day now, the Federal Emergency Management Agency is expected to release new flood maps that, in and of themselves, will cause great harm to more than 150,000 Metro East residents. If the maps are followed by an actual flood, the damage will be exponentially worse.

The new flood maps will acknowledge something that has been known for years: The five levees along the Mississippi River from Alton to Columbia are inadequate to protect against a 100-year flood. Knowing it is one thing; having it show up on a FEMA map is quite another. Once an area is designated on FEMA map as a "special flood hazard," real problems start.

Billions of dollars in development will be at risk because of higher credit costs. Federally regulated banks no longer will be permitted to lend to businesses and homeowners who lack adequate flood insurance. And, of course, premiums for flood insurance eventually will become 400 percent higher.

The problem isn't that the levees aren't high enough. The problem is that river water is seeping underneath them; old pumps and drainage tile installed during the late 1930s must be replaced.

Illinois could wait for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to do the work. Congress already authorized \$130 million in levee repair for the region. But the corps has a \$51 billion backlog of authorized projects. It receives about \$2 billion in funding to work on them. At that rate, it could be 20 years before the work is done. In the meantime, homes and businesses below the bluffs on the Illinois side of the river will be in jeopardy.

The next best thing is for Illinois communities to fund the work themselves. That's expensive — it could cost as much as \$180 million — but 65 percent of the cost eventually could be recovered if Congress appropriates funds to pay for levee repair.

Raising that kind of money will be difficult because many of the communities at risk are poor. Even if property tax rates were raised (they're already higher than on the Missouri side of the river), it's unrealistic to believe that residents could pay them.

Senate Bill 2052, now pending in the Illinois General Assembly, contains a practical solution. It would create flood prevention districts, established with the agreement of county officials, that could impose quarter-cent sales taxes to perform emergency levee repair. The districts would sell bonds backed by future sales tax revenue. That money would be used to repair levees and mitigate storm water runoff from higher elevations.

State Sen. Bill Haine, D-Alton, is sponsoring the bill. He says it's crucial to protect the counties' tax base and the region's economic health. There's certainly a lot at stake, with a \$2 billion expansion planned for the ConocoPhillips refinery in Roxana; \$350 million in new investment at the U.S.

Steel plant in Granite City and the \$650 million Opus Park 600 business park planned for Pontoon Beach.

About 4,000 businesses and nearly 60,000 homes and apartments are in areas protected by the five levees. Many have no flood insurance. Once the new FEMA flood maps receive final approval, insurance rates will go up drastically.

Getting a plan and a funding source in place now, before the map is finalized, would increase the confidence of businesses investing in the Metro East. It may allow Illinois officials to convince FEMA to keep flood insurance rates low while construction is underway.

Illinois lawmakers should move swiftly to approve SB 2052, and businesses and civic interests on both sides of the river should encourage them. There's no time to waste.

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Premier 370 buildings are on hold awaiting FEMA's OK

By ***Tim Bryant***

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Monday, Feb. 25 2008

ST. PETERS — Mike Hejna, president of Gundaker Commercial Group, says he wants to start building "yesterday" in the Premier 370 Business Park, where hundreds of acres sit idle.

As eager as he is to move on the multimillion-dollar project, Hejna and his co-developer are stalled until the Federal Emergency Management Agency makes Premier 370 eligible for federal flood insurance.

To do that, the agency must move its boundary of the Mississippi River floodway — generally, the area that carries moving floodwater — away from the Premier 370 levee. The revision is key to the city because without it the project is ineligible for the insurance. In bureaucratic lingo, the change is called a letter of map revision.

Premier 370 sits behind a four-mile, \$22.5 million levee designed to withstand a 500-year flood. The levee was built with proceeds from a city bond issue voters approved in 2000.

FEMA continues to have questions about the city's application for the letter. For example, while many have been answered to FEMA's satisfaction, the agency wants proof the city has notified the Illinois Department of Natural Resources of the revision request. In Illinois, officials have contended the levee will worsen flooding in Grafton and other areas.

The Great Rivers Habitat Alliance, an advocacy group for flood plain preservation, has been a persistent critic of the Premier 370 levee. Dan Burkemper, the group's executive director, said the focus is now on making sure levee work is done properly.

"And so far it hasn't been," he said.

Of key concern to FEMA is how the city intends to handle flooding where Norfolk Southern railroad tracks cross the levee in two spots.

In the past, the city considered a plan to raise tracks to the top of the levee. FEMA said in a letter to the city in December that it needs more information about the city's latest plan to use "railroad approved ballast" to prevent flooding.

Rudy Husband, a Norfolk Southern spokesman in Philadelphia, said the railroad and the city are cooperating on a revised levee plan that would not affect railroad operations. He said he did not know the details but noted early plans failed to satisfy FEMA.

Rick Sacbubit, a FEMA project engineer in Washington, said last week the city had yet to respond to the agency's latest concerns. If city officials fail to reply by March 17, the floodway application will be suspended, Sacbubit said.

"They would have to start the process all over again," he said. "If we don't have it in hand, we don't have anything."

The city said in a statement that officials "continue to work through the FEMA process and look forward to having this concluded in the very near future."

In a recent audit report of St. Peters, state Auditor Susan Montee said the Premier 370 project remains "at risk" while the floodway matter remains an issue. Without the map revision, the city will not get the \$25 million payment remaining due from Gundaker and Duke Realty, which agreed in 2006 to buy the Premier 370 site for \$49.6 million, the report said.

Auditors also noted the city has \$12.5 million in bond debts related to the project. If Premier 370 fails, the city would be responsible for those debts through its debt service fund, Montee's office said.

City officials have insisted the project will be a big moneymaker and eventually produce thousands of jobs. In their response to the audit, the city said it bought the Premier 370 land for 60 percent of its appraised value and sold it for four times as much.

"The city's foresight in acquiring this land prior to making it more valuable resulted in a profit to our taxpayers of approximately \$42.2 million," the city said.

Hejna said he remains confident FEMA will approve the application, allowing Gundaker and Duke to build warehouses and distribution facilities at Premier 370. The firms already have built roads and utility lines inside the levee.

But developers won't "go vertical" with buildings until the "final, final, final" FEMA letter is issued and market conditions are right, he added.

"Needless to say, the development group has a great sense of urgency to move forward," Hejna said. "Any delay is inconsistent with that effort."

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Posted on Tue, Feb. 26, 2008

St. Clair County OKs \$1.25 million for levee planning Task force holds its first meeting

BY BRIAN BRUEGGEMANN
News-Democrat

St. Clair County on Monday approved spending \$1.25 million for a preliminary engineering study on the deficiencies of the Fish Lake and Prairie Du Pont levee systems.

Earlier in the day, a tri-county task force studying how to make and pay for repairs to the metro-east's levee systems along the Mississippi River held its first meeting.

The levees stretch from Alton to Columbia. Four systems are operated by local levee districts, one, by the federal government.

The preliminary studies already have been done for the other levee districts. The Prairie Du Pont levee district will provide up to another \$750,000 for the study St. Clair County approved Monday, County Board Chairman Mark Kern said.

Federal officials say the cost of the preliminary study on the Fish Lake and Prairie Du Pont levees, both of which are in St. Clair County, could be much less than \$2 million, Kern said. If money is left over, Kern said it could be put toward later engineering studies.

The task force, composed of government and business leaders appointed by the leaders of St. Clair, Madison and Monroe counties, heard a briefing Monday from the East-West Gateway Council of Governments, which is helping address the levee-repair issue.

An estimated \$136 million to \$180 million in repairs are needed to prevent the American Bottoms flood plain from being declared a flood-hazard area in 2009 because of new Federal Emergency Management Agency guidelines. That designation could result in property buyers having to pay up to \$3,000 annually for flood insurance. East-West Gateway has completed a federal application that, if approved in the next month or so, would keep the cost of flood insurance from increasing significantly while the levee improvements are being addressed.

Task force chairman Jim Pennekamp said the group's first year of work will be intense.

Maggie Hales, deputy director of East-West Gateway, told task force members the levees withheld severe flooding in 1993 and 1995. Sandbagging had to be done in each levee district during past flood periods because of underseepage. But levees that require emergency sand-bagging during a 100-year flood will be declared inadequate under the new FEMA guidelines.

"There was a change in rules, pretty simply," Hales said.

The task force members got updates on the following aspects of the issue:

- East-West Gateway director Les Sterman said the Illinois legislature soon will consider a proposal by Sen. Bill Haine, D-Alton, that would allow the three counties to collect a quarter-cent, countywide sales tax to pay for the work and for storm water drainage improvements. The revenue could be used for a bond issue. Sterman said that so far, no one has come up with a better idea on how to pick up the tab.

"Right now, it's kind of the only game in town," Sterman said.

The tax would end after the work is paid for or after 25 years, whichever comes first.

The task force hopes to get reimbursement from the federal government for 65 percent of the final cost. But Sterman said the federal funding process is "murky," and it could take up to 25 years. East-West Gateway suggests local governments get the money together as soon as possible so the work can be finished in 10 years or less.

Some of the task force members said the region needs to work fast because of the insurance issue, because lives and property are at stake, and because development would be affected. East-West Gateway has reported that up to \$5 billion in developments, including a large expansion at ConocoPhillips refinery in Wood River, could be in jeopardy.

- Madison County Board Chairman Alan Dunstan said he and Kern will be in Washington, D.C., in early March to lobby for passage of a measure sponsored by U.S. Rep.s Jerry Costello, D-Belleville, and John Shimkus, R-Collinsville.

The measure would push back the flood-mapping timeline for the metro-east, putting the area on the same schedule as Missouri, which is expected to have its new maps finished in 2010 or 2011.

- Task force members got answers on various aspects of flood insurance. They were told that if a property owner buys flood insurance before the new FEMA maps are finalized, the rate would be "grandfathered-in" even if the area is declared a flood hazard.

Dunstan said banks "are already calling me" about the issue. He said some already are considering requiring customers to get flood insurance if they get a loan for property in the affected area.

Contact reporter Brian Brueggemann at bbrueggemann@bnd.com or 692-9481.

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Posted on Fri, Feb. 29, 2008

Metro-east leaders learn more about \$180 million needed for levees

Five districts all impact each other

BY MARIA BARAN
News-Democrat

Metro-east leaders spent Thursday morning learning more about the estimated \$180 million in repairs needed for the region's levees at the Greater Belleville Chamber of Commerce Issues and Eggs Breakfast.

"We need everyone to understand what a big deal this is," said Les Sterman, executive director of the East-West Gateway Council of Governments, who led the presentation.

The five levee districts in St. Clair, Madison and Monroe counties stretch from Alton to Columbia, and protect more than 250 square miles, 155,000 residents and 4,000 businesses in the American Bottoms floodplain.

New federal guidelines on whether a levee can withstand a major flood are expected to declare the area a flood hazard zone in 2009 unless repairs are made. Such designation could lead homeowners to pay up to \$3,000 a year for flood insurance.

St. Clair County Board Chairman Mark Kern and Monroe County Board Commissioner Dale Haudrich also spoke at the meeting.

Madison County Board Chairman Alan Dunstan was unable to attend. All three are expected to travel to Washington, D.C., next week to lobby for a delay in the federal rules until after the Missouri side of the river also needs to make repairs, which would allow for a coordinated effort.

Haudrich said no one is an expert on the necessary repairs.

"It's kind of a moving target," he said. "And we're all working together."

The five levees are "hydrologically linked," meaning that one faulty levee could put the entire region under water, Sterman explained.

The levees suffer from underseepage -- water that simply works its way underneath the levee.

Kern stressed that the levee repairs were not caused by maintenance issues. Rather, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have changed requirements since the levee failures during Hurricane Katrina.

"The Corps has learned a lot since the 1920s when these were first built," Sterman said.

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Posted on Sun, Mar. 02, 2008

4 firms hired to plan \$180 million levee project Update needed for flood protection

BY RICKEENA J. RICHARDS
News-Democrat

The East-West Gateway Council of Governments board of directors hired four St. Louis-based firms to make plans for an estimated \$180 million project to repair the metro-east region's levees.

The contracts with URS Corporation, AMEC Earth and Environmental, Stifel Nicolaus and Husch Blackwell Sanders LLP total at \$225,000, East-West Gateway said in a press release.

New federal guidelines on whether a levee can withstand a major flood are expected to declare the area a flood hazard zone in 2009 unless repairs are made or a time delay can be worked out. Such designation could lead homeowners to pay up to \$3,000 a year for flood insurance.

The five levee districts in St. Clair, Madison and Monroe counties stretch from Alton to Columbia and protect more than 250 square miles, 155,000 residents and 4,000 businesses in the American Bottoms floodplain.

East-West Gateway estimated repairs for the five levee systems could cost from \$136 million to \$180 million. Local levee districts may have to pay \$47 million to qualify for federal funding for the remainder of the cost.

The project is expected to take about six months.

Madison County Board Chairman Alan Dunstan, St. Clair County Board Chairman Mark Kern and Monroe County Board Commissioner Dale Haudrich are expected to travel to Washington, D.C., this week to lobby for a delay in the federal rules until after the Missouri side of the river also needs to make repairs, which would allow for a coordinated effort.

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Posted on Sun, Mar. 02, 2008

Depending on Durbin

This week a delegation of metro-east leaders, including county board chairmen Mark Kern, Alan Dunstan and Dale Haudrich, will travel to Washington, D.C. It's not a pleasure trip. They're meeting with Sen. Dick Durbin to stress the importance of a legislative change regarding the levees.

They want the federal government to evaluate levees on both sides of a river at the same time. Makes sense, right? But because of goofy Federal Emergency Management Administration boundaries, the metro-east and St. Louis are in separate districts. The result is that FEMA is ready to declare the Mississippi River levees on the metro-east side inadequate, while the evaluation of the St. Louis side is still several years away.

A Durbin spokesman insists he already understands the need for the change. But his actions don't show it. U.S. Reps. Jerry Costello and John Shimkus got legislation passed in the House in a matter of weeks. That was five months ago. Durbin still hasn't gotten the job done in the Senate.

It can't be for a lack of clout. He's the assistant majority leader, the second highest ranking senator. Could it be he's too busy making the Sunday morning talk show rounds to remember the area where he was born and grew up?

Barack Obama, of course, is Illinois' other senator and should be pushing this issue also. But clearly his focus is on the presidential race. Metro-east issues? Forget about them.

It's all up to Durbin.

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Task force working on levee problem

Map changes could jeopardize local economy

EDWARDSVILLE — The Leadership Task Force, formed to help guide efforts to restore five levees protecting the Metro East's flood plain, has begun its work.

The group is made up of 15 members representing Madison, St. Clair and Monroe counties, as well as representatives of the Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois and East-West Gateway Council of Governments, who serve as advisory members and representatives of the affected levee districts.

Attendees received a briefing on the levees' status and an overview of the progress on initiatives that may help to minimize the impact of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's pending action.

The meeting also provided an opportunity for Task Force members to ask questions and gain a clearer

understanding of the specific charge of the Task Force in the coming months. The Task Force agreed that its focus will be on making recommendations regarding:

- Financial planning, including sources of revenue and programming of funds.

- Flood protection improvement programming, including a list of physical improvements and cost estimates.

- Management planning, including an implementation schedule, accountability and responsibility for design and construction.

- Legislative and regulatory actions, including federal reimbursement, flood insurance and revenue source.

- Community engagement

activities, focusing on residents, businesses, local government and civic organizations.

It is anticipated the principal work of the Task Force will be completed within six months of its initial meeting, but the Task Force will remain operational for another six months to assist in engaging the community regarding the recommendations and supporting the implementation of those recommendations.

The Task Force was created in response to FEMA's plans to change Southwestern Illinois' flood insurance designation as part of its national Flood Map modernization process. Based on deficien-

cies identified by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, FEMA has stated that it would no longer consider the five levees to be certifiable at the 100-flood year level. New maps that are being redrawn would show the entire American Bottom area — from the Mississippi River east to Bluff Road — as a special flood hazard area

(SFHA). This change in designation coming several years in advance of any updated maps being released for the Missouri side of the metro area — and many other regions of the country — could put the Metro East at a distinct economic disadvantage.

The Task Force will meet again in mid-March.

THE TELEGRAPH

Sunday, March 2, 2008 • Page A5

Metro-east officials talk with Durbin on levees

More time sought for repairs

BY DAVE MONTGOMERY
Washington correspondent

WASHINGTON — A delegation of metro-east officials began making the rounds in Washington on Tuesday in an attempt to buy more time to repair Mississippi River levees in five districts before the federal government declares the area a flood-hazard zone.

Six Madison County officials huddled with home state Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., and Sen. Chris Dodd, D-Conn., to begin a two-day series of meetings to address what they described as the region's most important issue.

As many as 150,000 Illinois residents are facing mandatory flood insurance as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) moves toward declaring the region a flood hazard zone until the levees are repaired.

The flood-plain remapping has angered political leaders and businesses throughout the metro-east because Missouri, which is part of the same watershed, won't be subject to remapping for one or two more years.

Illinois residents fear the mandated flood insurance will undercut property values and send future development across the river.

The metro-east originally planned to field a three-county delegation to Washington but the region's severe snow storm forced offi-



Durbin

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LEVEES | Haine's quarter-cent sales tax proposal modified

Continued from Page A1

cials from St. Clair and Monroe counties to stay behind. The Madison County delegation was already in Washington for a meeting of the National Association of Counties.

Madison County Board Chairman Alan Dunstan said the scaled-down delegation would nevertheless present a unified front for all three counties. The message, he said, is this: The metro-east will cooperate with the federal government to carry out the needed repairs on the levees but needs time to perform the work and wants a "level playing field" with Missouri.

"We want to be treated like our cousins in Missouri," he said. "We don't want to be treated any better, and we don't want to be treated any worse."

The House last year passed an amendment by Rep. Jerry Costello, D-Belleveille, that would delay

the requirement to purchase flood insurance until remapping has been completed for the entire watershed.

Durbin is sponsoring an identical amendment in the Senate.

Durbin invited Dodd into the briefing because the Connecticut Democrat serves as chairman of the Senate Banking Committee and oversees the National Flood Insurance Reauthorization bill that would include the Durbin amendment. Durbin said he wanted Dodd to "hear firsthand the urgency of the issue."

FEMA is expected to release preliminary maps for Madison, Monroe and St. Clair counties in June. Dunstan said the two senators promised to "do everything they could" to get Durbin's amendment passed, although the Senate's timetable for acting on the bill has not been determined.

Metro-east officials were scheduled to meet today with

Costello and Rep. John Shimkus, R-Collinsville. They also planned a Pentagon meeting with Assistant Army Secretary John Woodley, who oversees the service's civil works program.

Dunstan said that metro-east officials have been working with the Army Corps of Engineers and have stressed their commitment to getting the levees repaired within four or five years.

The repairs could cost up to \$180 million, and local officials have been studying ways to finance the project. State Sen. Bill Haine, D-Alton, has submitted state legislation for a temporary quarter-cent sales tax to fund the repairs.

Dunstan said metro-east officials are presenting a message of cooperation to federal officials and hope the region will emerge as a positive example as FEMA remaps flood plains across the country. "We know we have a problem," he said. "Work with us

to fix us the problem."

In another development, Haine said Tuesday he is revising his quarter-cent sales tax proposal to remove a provision allowing the revenue to also be used toward stormwater drainage improvements. Critics have argued it would lead to uncertainty on when the tax would end.

The sales tax would end after bonds issued for the work are paid off, or after 25 years, whichever comes first.

Haine said he plans to file the amended bill today.

"It became a source of consternation among some who felt that it would extend the life of the tax," Haine said. "Rather than dealing with that, it's better to keep the focus on the original intent of the bill, which is to repair the levees to a 500-year flood level."

Reporter Brian Brueggemann also contributed to this report.

Contracts awarded in levee restoration effort

The East-West Gateway Council of Governments Board of Directors has approved contracts with three local firms to develop a plan and strategy for repair and restoration of the flood control systems in Southwestern Illinois.

The contracts awarded were for a total of \$225,000, with the work expected to take approximately six months. The firms were hired to provide engineering support, financial analysis, legal and legislative assistance for the project.

The 24-member board also voted to support the Flood Prevention District Act proposed by state Sen. William Haine, D-Alton, which proposes a quarter-cent sales tax that could be imposed to finance the repair and restoration of flood protection systems in Madison, Monroe and St. Clair counties in Illinois.

The firms hired for the initial planning and strategy work are URS/AMEC of St. Louis, Stifel Nicolaus of St. Louis and Husch Blackwell Sanders LLP of St. Louis. All three firms have subcontractors located in Illinois.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency plans to examine the nation's levees as part of the National

Flood Plain Remapping Program. In the local aspect of that program, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers determined it would not recertify that the levees along the Mississippi River in Illinois could withstand a 100-year flood event.

That means about 150,000 people and about 4,000 businesses on the Illinois side of the St. Louis region may be remapped as part of a "special flood hazard area." That would mean the city of East St. Louis and the industrial communities of Wood River and Granite City would, for the purposes of flood insurance, be considered at high risk of flooding.

East-West Gateway estimates that to repair the five levee systems in Madison, Monroe and St. Clair counties could cost from \$136 million to \$180 million. Local levee districts may have to put up \$47 million to qualify for federal funding to cover the rest of the cost. The levee districts in Illinois are Chain of Rocks, Fish Lake, Metro East, Prairie Du Pont and Wood River. The federal government owns the Chain of Rocks Levee District, and the other levee districts are locally owned.



03/11/2008

County takes look at levees

Steve Horrell, stevehorrell@hotmail.com, The Edwardsville Intelligencer

Repairing and restoring the regions' levee system is the next big issue facing the area, said Madison County Board Chairman Al Dunstan.

Dunstan returned recently from a two-day series of meetings in Washington, D.C., where he and other county officials discussed levee issue with several senators, congressmen and other officials.

"If these levees break, it would devastate our area, even if you live above the bluffs," said Dunstan. "We don't have a choice but levees up to the 500-year level."

The Federal Emergency Management Agency plans to examine the nation's levees as part of the National Flood Plain Remapping Program.

In the local aspect of that program, the Army Corps of Engineers determined it would not recertify that the levees along the Mississippi River in Illinois could withstand a 100-year flood event, according to a news release from the East-West Gateway Council of Governments. That means that about 150,000 people and 4,000 businesses on the St. Louis region may be remapped as part of a flood-hazard area.

That result is that East St. Louis, Wood River and Granite City would, for the purposes of flood insurance, be considered at high flooding.

East-West Gateway estimates that to repair the five levee systems in Madison, Monroe and St. Clair counties could cost \$136 million to \$180 million. Local levee districts may have to put up \$47 million to qualify for federal funding to cover the rest of the cost.

The Washington trip, Dunstan said, was an effort to cut through red tape and find a way to bring the levees up to a 500-year level. Board members Brenda Roosevelt of Glen Carbon, Mark Burris of Wood River, and Michael "Doc" Holliday of Alton, joined Dunstan along with County Administrator Joe Parents and Planning and Zoning Supervisor Frank Miles.

A snow storm forced St. Clair County Board Chairman Mark Kern and Monroe County Board Chairman Dale Haudrich to stay in Alton.

To bring the levees up to the 500-year level, state Sen. Bill Haine has proposed a quarter-cent sales tax for all three counties.

The tax produces about \$6.6 million for both Madison and St. Clair counties, and about \$800,000 for Monroe County. That would require the counties to seek bonds for \$150 to \$170 million.

"We're hoping it's not going to take that much," Dunstan said. The tax, he added, will not be made permanent. "When the levee is repaired, the sales tax goes away," Dunstan said.

Four firms - AMEC Earth and Environment, URS Corp., Stiffel Nicolaus and Husch Blackwell Sanders - have been hired by the county to make the repairs.

FEMA has said that it plans to issue preliminary maps for Madison, St. Clair and Monroe counties in June.

But maps for St. Louis - which is in a different district - will not be released for three or four more years. Madison County officials are backing a so-called "Costello Amendment" which calls for all the maps to be released at the same time. That, Dunstan said, would give Madison County time to deal with the problem.

The Madison County officials met first with U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill. and Chris Dodd, D-Conn. Dunstan hopes to change the public's says is a misconception that he simply wants to delay doing anything about the levee situation.

"The perception might have been that we were trying to delay this, and just put things off," he said. "That's not the case. We are committed to bring the levees up to the 500-year level for Madison, St. Clair and Monroe counties. We're not changing out time are working as fast as we can to do this."

As many as 150,000 Illinois residents are facing mandatory flood insurance as FEMA moves toward declaring the region a flood zone until the levees can be repaired.

Illinois residents fear the mandated flood insurance will undercut property values and send future development across the river. said he encourages all homeowners in the three-county area to purchase flood insurance.

Dunstan also traveled recently to New Orleans, where he said 80 to 85 percent of homeowners have flood insurance, in contrast districts protected by the Metro East levees where less than 1 percent do.



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Last modified: Saturday, March 29, 2008 12:06 PM CDT

The flood factor

By Chris Coates

Even after weeks of rain, Madison County Planning and Development land use planner Phil Little was surprised to find the muddy water in Long Lake as high as it was Friday morning.

"Wow, that's close," he said, after steering his sport utility vehicle off Nameoki Road on the western edge of the swollen lake, where water lapped against the street's shoulder. "It looks like we don't have much more storage left."

The level is an indication of just how important a role Long Lake, part of a massive necklace of ponds and canals across Granite City and Pontoon Beach, plays in staving off flood conditions in Madison County.

After all, if it weren't for Long Lake - and the web of ditches, canals, ponds and levees that work with it - the deluge of rain that fell on the region last week would have ended up pouring into low-lying areas such as Granite City, Madison, Venice and Mitchell, causing the type of damage that devastated parts of St. Louis and Franklin counties.

All together, the system is vital to keeping the Metro East above water, said Frank O. Miles, the administrator of the Madison County Planning and Development Department, on a tour of several flood control devices Friday.

"It's linked hydrologically. They all kind of build off each other," he said.

The system, maintained by a hodgepodge of private land owners and municipalities, directs runoff from across the region - from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville and homes on Collinsville bluffs to rows of warehouses in Pontoon Beach - through a maze of waterways, and eventually to the Mississippi River.

"The water, it comes here," said Randy Presswood, a construction supervisor for the Metro East Sanitary District, standing on top of pump station south of Canteen Lake alongside Interstate 55-70.

The Sanitary District manages almost all of the drainage issues for the southern half of Madison County



CHRIS COATES PHOTO Madison County Planning and Development Administrator Frank O. Miles stands in front of a retention pond in Mitchell. The devices are a key piece of the region's complex stormwater system.

and all of St. Clair County and it is Presswood's job to keep tabs on a daunting number of systems, including almost 20 miles of levees and 16,425 feet of floodwall.

For him, a large chunk of his job involves making sure the existing runoff devices are clear of debris and able to direct water downstream.

That means dredging waterways and tearing down trees, a job crews completed earlier this year on Long Lake.

"We had to get this all out of here," Presswood said, pointing to a row of sludge and tree stumps pulled from the lake alongside Pontoon Road. "When we come up with a problem, we try to rectify the problem."

The agency, one of a handful in the region, has also built new canals and redirected sewers. Crews recently installed a new culvert beneath Maryville Road in Granite City to alleviate annual flooding in the Mitchell Lakes subdivision.

Little, the land use planner, said there were no reported problems from the neighborhood during this month's storms.

"This used to always be full of water," he said, driving down a dry Stephanie Drive.

Still, the region's explosion of new developments, some that don't take into account runoff issues or the region's topography, are worsening conditions, Presswood said.

"All this concrete, all these roofs weren't here 10 years ago," Presswood said. "Every raindrop has to go some place."

The runoff has also deposited massive amounts of dirt and debris in Horseshoe Lake, raising its water level.

The state Department of Natural Resources, which manages the 2,960-acre Horseshoe Lake Park, earlier this year dropped the lake's level to account for spring rains, but concerns remain about long-term plans, especially as the state faces a budget crunch.

The county, meanwhile, has toughened standards for new projects, and the Planning and Development Committee has ramped up its efforts to carefully vet new projects, Miles said.

"We have to be more cognizant of those sensitive areas," he said.

Presswood, who has been working with water issues for 28 years, said the county and Sanitary District work is starting to pay off. Conditions are steadily improving, he said, and flooding is more controllable.

"Things change every year," Presswood said during the tour. "But I think we're in the best situation to get the water out. The drainage is working."

Levee concerns remain

The assurances come as the county, Sanitary District and other agencies grapple with another key piece in flood control: levees.

The federal government in 2005 toughened standards on whether the devices will survive serious flooding, and five Metro East levees are not expected to pass the new rules.

Regions with faulty levees are usually labeled a flood hazardous zone, requiring residents and businesses to buy expensive insurance.

The remapping will come online later this year for Illinois, but not for another two or three years for Missouri, even though the state is in the same watershed.

That discrepancy prompted U.S. Reps. Jerry F. Costello (D-Bellefonte) and John M. Shimkus (R-Collinsville) and U.S. Sen. Richard J. Durbin (D-Ill.) to submit legislation that would put off the flood insurance requirement until remapping is completed for the entire area. The U.S. House of Representatives approved that plan last year; the Senate has not voted on such a bill yet.

The East-West Gateway Council of Governments, meanwhile, has spearheaded about \$180 million in fixes on the levees.

The project is in the planning phases, but funding is a major stumbling block.

The state Senate is expected to vote on a measure by next month that would apply a quarter-cent sales tax in Madison, St. Clair and Monroe counties.

State Sen. William R. Haine (D-Alton), who sponsored the measure, on Thursday said the bill should be a priority.

"This is a regional issue that must be fixed by the region," he said. "Declassification of the levees will bring development to an absolute halt. It would devastate the region for the next 50 years."

Haine said he's optimistic with the bill's chances in both the Senate and House. But he was less enthused about Gov. Rod R. Blagojevich, who has not publicly supported the plan.

"I'm just focused on one day at a time," Haine said.

With those plans up in the air, Presswood points out that the levees are still safe.

"That's a big misunderstanding: that the levies are in bad shape," he said. "They're not."

Also unclear is that the levees require construction, Presswood said. Instead, fixes would involve adding relief wells, a type of vertical stainless steel pipes that disperse water instead of it flowing under levies, weakening the levees.

For now, Miles said the region is working together to make sure the fixes happen.

"The county has made this a priority," he said. "We've got to get a handle on that."

Up-close: A century of Metro East flooding

1927: Weeks of heavy rain put pressure on primitive levees in several states along the Mississippi River, eventually breaking seven

1973: The Mississippi stands above flood stage for 146 days, making it one of the worst floods to that

date

December 1982: Heavy rains inundate much of southern Illinois and Missouri; 180 residents and workers are moved off Chouteau Island, which faces rising Mississippi River waters

October 1986: After heavy rains, an East St. Louis levee gate gives way, causing \$18 million in flood damage

July 1993: Massive rains and flooding in the upper Midwest send a deluge of water into Mississippi River tributaries south; 1,000 levees fail, 70,000 buildings suffer damage and 50 people die; Chouteau Island is largely abandoned

April 1994: Rising flood waters top levees, filling farmer fields and closing numerous roads in Madison and St. Clair counties

June 2001: Weeks of rain cause millions of dollars in crop damage

March: Tributaries in the southern Midwest flood; hardest hit locally is the Meramec River near Valley Park, Mo.

Sources: Journal archives, Illinois Department of Energy and Natural Resources



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Flooding revives debate over levees

By [Ken Leiser](#)

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Monday, Mar. 31 2008

Pacific Mayor Herbert Adams knows the roiling floodwaters of the Meramec River will return. It's just a matter of time.

The murky brown water can rise just as quickly as it retreated last week, and there's nothing to keep it from swamping the low-lying, southern part of his city.

"That is why I keep saying that we are acting like a big bird with our head in the sand. It is predictable," Adams said. "My prediction is that every day that we get up without some kind of protection, we're one day closer to the next flood."

So when the Meramec broke free of its banks this last time — damaging 180 homes and 30 businesses in his town alone — Adams implored state and federal leaders to provide a levee or some other form of flood protection to shield Pacific from another watery mess in the future.

The latest wave of river flooding has rekindled debate over levee building on eastern Missouri and Southern Illinois waterways. Throughout the St. Louis region, 89 federally recognized levees and flood protection systems have been erected along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers and their major tributaries.

Collectively, they're counted on to protect vast tracts that include residential neighborhoods, factories and interstate highways. But critics say levees are an expensive fix that have spawned widespread development on historically flood-prone land and have lulled people into a false sense of security.

Conservationists and some local university professors say levees alter the natural flows of rivers, making flooding worse for some unprotected tracts.

"If you have to build a levee, at what expense do you pay later when the flood heights are continually being increased?" said Dan Burkemper, executive director of the Great Rivers Habitat Alliance, a group that promotes preservation of flood plains. "At what point do you win? The water always flows to the next person without a levee."

Even the success of the \$49 million Valley Park levee — which held its ground against the Meramec in its first major test — was countered by hotly disputed claims that it displaced water and caused some damage upstream.

"Thanks for the water, Valley Park," read a handmade sign on a red-tagged Pacific home.

Despite recent controversies swirling around levee development — including the four-mile, \$22.5 million levee guarding the Premier 370 Business Park in St. Peters — there are no long lines of landowners or communities wanting to build more, said Joe Kellett, the senior civilian engineer for the Army Corps of Engineers' St. Louis district.

"Not in this day and age, it is actually very uncommon," he said. "If you think about it, the vast majority of our work recently is to ensure what is there is stable."

Posing a major challenge are five existing levees along the Mississippi between Alton and Columbia, which will require as much as \$180 million in repairs. The aging Metro East levees are tall enough to withstand major flooding, but they need new pumps, pipes and gates.

New relief wells will have to be built to prevent river water from seeping underneath them.

"If you look at the risk for the Metro East levees, certainly, logically you would put a lot of funds in those levees because the risk there is tremendous," Kellett said.

Southern Illinois leaders are scrambling for the money to repair the levee systems.

Meantime, before the corps gets involved in the study, design and construction of a new levee, it needs authorization and funding from Congress. Cities or property owners seeking a levee have to share in half the cost to study the idea and 35 percent of the cost to design and build it.

A proposed levee must compete for funds against other new start and repair projects across the country, Kellett said.

A LARGER PLAN

Protecting Pacific against flooding is not a new idea.

In 1987, the Army Corps of Engineers studied flood prevention in Pacific and other communities along the lower Meramec River. While it concluded that frequent, costly flooding in Valley Park warranted a levee, the cost-to-benefit ratio didn't support building a \$2.3 million to \$3.4 million levee in Pacific.

Today, a levee must have cost-to-benefit ratio of 1 or greater — meaning that for every dollar spent, it must return a dollar or more in protection, Kellett said.

The study suggested that other communities along the lower Meramec rely on home buyouts and a warning system.

At the urging of Pacific officials, U.S. Rep. Kenny Hulshof, R-Columbia, last year sought a study focusing on flooding in and around the town, citing its growth.

The House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee approved the special resolution, but Congress didn't fund the \$100,000 cost of the study. Hulshof is still trying to get the funding, a spokesman said.

Adams, the Pacific mayor, backed away slightly from his original demand for a levee late last week. Instead, Adams said, he wants to find a solution that will benefit not just his town but others along the Meramec River.

"I am talking about a much larger plan than just a levee for Pacific," Adams said.

Steve Nagle, director of community planning with the East-West Gateway Council of Governments, said a summit meeting on Meramec flooding is in the works.

"Flood protection is more than just building levees, although levees are an extremely important part of protecting property and public safety," Nagle said. "But there's another part of the flood protection formula which includes wise use of flood plains."

River experts say those calling for levees along the Meramec are ignoring such options as buyouts. Several communities that line the river — including Fenton,

Eureka and Arnold — began federally supported buyouts after floods in the 1980s and '90s.

Adams said there has been no serious discussion about buyouts in flood-prone areas of Pacific.

Robert Criss, a Washington University geologist, said flooding is not the river's fault. The same places that were swamped by this month's flooding were the same places that were flooded in 1982 and 1994, he said.

"When we build in flood plains, we then put infrastructure in harm's way," he said. "We are just asking for trouble."

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