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Guest view: Region pushes ahead with levee restoration

Last week marked a significant milestone in the effort to restore and recertify the levees protecting the American Bottoms. In response to a request from U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin and U.S. Rep. Jerry Costello, the Federal Emergency Management Agency agreed to delay the release of new metro-east flood hazard maps until the remapping is completed for the entire St. Louis region.

FEMA's decision is an important step in a challenging process that began just over a year ago, when the agency announced the five metro-east levees would be deaccredited as part of its National Flood Map Modernization program.

While the intent to update flood risk data to protect lives and property is good, there have been many flaws in the local implementation. The most glaring is the suggestion that rising water levels only affect eastern banks of the Mississippi River. What Costello and Durbin asked from the start was that our region's flood protection systems be analyzed as a complete system. After a year, FEMA finally brings logic and some economic equity to this process.

While residents in the flood hazard areas would still be encouraged to secure flood insurance, there is no required -- or possibly forced -- purchase of insurance until the entire region has been remapped. This additional time could have significant benefits, considering how effective our region has been since FEMA's announcement 13 months ago. The three County Board chairmen, along with community-level officials, business leaders and levee district representatives, have demonstrated remarkable regional cooperation and made significant progress that includes:

- Working with Sen. Bill Haine and other state legislators to determine a viable funding solution, and securing swift passage of legislation enabling the recent establishment of flood protection districts within Madison, St. Clair and Monroe counties that have authorized a 1/4 -cent sales tax to generate funds to restore the levees.
- Applying for restoration or AR zone designation, which is reflected on the preliminary flood risk maps. Advantages of this designation include carryover of lower flood insurance rates and reasonable elevation requirements for properties in certain "developed areas."
- Accelerating the reconstruction process by forward-funding some preliminary work on the levees. Both Madison and St. Clair counties found innovative approaches to initiate engineering and repair efforts that will help us achieve our five-year reconstruction goal.

While the decision to delay the maps is good for the region, it will not lull metro-east leaders into complacency. Rather, it will strengthen their resolve to push forward with the restoration efforts to protect more than 150,000 residents, 4,000 businesses, 50,000 jobs and a multi-billion dollar development pipeline. Our growth in manufacturing, warehousing, logistics and 21st century energies makes us a vital part of the larger metropolitan area. With what's been accomplished in the past year, we are confident metro-east leaders will continue working together to recertify the levees in a timely manner, so we can remain a driving force behind the region's success.

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