



## **Huge levee project advances Area flood board OKs first phase despite opposition from dozens of residents.**

**By Matt Weiser**

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A massive levee-strengthening project in Sacramento's Natomas basin got its first nod of approval on Thursday, despite objections from dozens of residents who fear they'll lose homes or property to the work. The project, estimated to cost more than \$400 million, will raise or widen nearly 25 miles of Natomas levees over three years. It is designed to double flood protection in the deep-flood basin and prevent levee underseepage that threatens the basin's more than 70,000 residents.

On Thursday, the Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency approved an overarching environmental impact report for the project. It also approved the first phase of construction in 2008, which involves raising and widening levees along the Natomas Cross Canal and the northernmost five miles of levee along the Sacramento River.

One fledgling group of property owners along the Garden Highway is considering a legal challenge to the project. And the project still must be approved by state and federal officials. SAFCA also plans another environmental study on subsequent construction phases.

More than 200 people attended Thursday's meeting, many of them Garden Highway residents opposed to the project. They want the project delayed for more analysis of impacts on residents of new levees that will be raised as much as 3 feet and widened by 300 feet. Some also fear that taller levees will cause homes built on the water side of the Garden Highway to suffer deeper flooding. "This project will negatively affect the property values of every homeowner on the Garden Highway," said David Ingram, a water-side homeowner.

The SAFCA board approved the project by an 11-1 vote. The majority said there has been sufficient study and that delays could preclude a 2008 construction start, prolonging the region's flood risk. "I can't look my neighbors in Natomas in the eye if I don't do everything I can to

move this forward," said board member John Shiels, who represents Reclamation District 1000, the levee maintaining agency in Natomas. "We can't take the chance that by delaying one year, that might be the year we have a major flood." Sutter County Supervisor Dan Silva cast the only dissenting vote, saying he was concerned about effects on Garden Highway property owners, particularly farmers.

A number of Natomas residents expressed support for the project, saying stronger levees are crucial to the region's safety and economic well-being. Many wore stickers that read "Move Forward." Supporter Keith Sharward expressed thanks for the sacrifices a relatively small number of property owners are being asked to make for the sake of the majority. "These folks will lose their homes so that many others will be more protected against losing theirs," said Sharward, a Natomas resident. "But it needs to be done. It needs to be done without delay."

This fix became necessary after the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers determined last year that Natomas levees no longer meet a minimum 100-year standard because of underseepage concerns. This will require residents to obtain flood insurance and may cause building restrictions in the basin until sufficient protection is restored, probably in 2010. The 100-year rule means levees can withstand water flows so big that they're likely to happen once in a century.

The project approved Thursday targets this threat by constructing a massive new "piggyback" levee adjacent to existing levees. It includes a huge earthen berm stretching up 300 feet wider than the existing levee to contain underseepage. In some areas, this piggyback levee will be taller to defend against high waves that could cause erosion and failure. Funding comes from a \$326 million property tax increase approved by 82 percent of Sacramento voters in April, along with state and federal sources.

SAFCA consultant Joe Countryman, president of MBK Engineers in Sacramento, said Sacramento River levees protecting Natomas are already tall enough to pass a 200-year flood. But the extra levee height, required by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, is needed to contain waves that could spill over the levee and cause erosion. Thus, he said, the project will not increase flood depths for Garden Highway residents whose homes are on the water-side of the levee, or by other levee districts north and west of Natomas.

This issue, however, will be subject to additional scrutiny by the state Reclamation Board and the Corps of Engineers, both of which must approve the project before construction starts. The corps is drafting its own environmental study on the first phase of construction, expected early next year.

Garden Highway residents recently formed the Garden Highway Community Association to collect donations for a possible legal challenge. "We haven't met to decide the next step, but all legal options are going to be explored," said Patrick Tully, a Garden Highway resident and spokesman for the group.