



Editorial: Protect Natomas quickly, yes-but wisely, too

Declaring emergency won't speed levee work and could hurt flood control efforts

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To bring Natomas' levees back up to snuff, the Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency is set to embark on a colossal amount of levee work in a very short time. In roughly two years, SAFCA plans to strengthen 25 miles of levee and move 5 million cubic yards of dirt, while keeping open a Garden Highway that is lined with houses. Some agencies would spend five to 10 years securing permits and funding for such a \$400 million project, but SAFCA is pursuing a timeline unprecedented in Central Valley history, juggling 850 separate tasks to move the project forward.

You'd think that Natomas developers, whose properties will be protected by this work, would be grateful. Alas, they are not. Focused solely on their own financial bottom lines, Natomas developers and some city officials - including City Manager Ray Kerridge - have been disparaging SAFCA and the state and federal agencies that are partnering on the Natomas work. Kerridge and development lawyer Greg Thatch have effectively accused SAFCA of dragging its feet, claiming its two-year schedule could be halved by a year. Both want Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and federal officials to declare a state of emergency for Natomas, which supposedly would cut through red tape.

The kingpins of Natomas development have reasons to be anxious. Because of tougher federal guidelines in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the government has classified Natomas a flood hazard zone, where it will stay until its levees are upgraded. The rezoning will soon halt new building in Natomas, with the exception of projects that already have permits. Clearly, some landowners will lose money during this period (being unable to flip properties) and the city will lose revenue from building permits. But the clumsy effort to seek an emergency declaration could hurt Sacramento more than it could help.

Here's Why:

- SAFCA has already completed a state environmental study. Thanks to quick work by the Reclamation Board, it has nearly all the state permits it needs. So a state declaration of emergency wouldn't help much on these.
- To expedite federal permits for Natomas, Sacramento would need a federal declaration of emergency. It is unlikely to get one. The feds didn't match the state's 2006 flood emergency declaration, and they probably won't match one now.
- Permits are only part of the challenge for SAFCA. The agency also needs to secure rights-of-way for levee work. An emergency declaration would do little to help on this.
- Lastly, Sacramento has built strong relationships with resource agencies over the years, which is why SAFCA has become such a successful regional agency. An emergency declaration might send the wrong signal, that Sacramento wants to roll over those agencies. It also might tell Congress - whose help is needed in funding Natomas levee work - that the city cares more about developers than flood control partnerships.

Overall, Kerridge's aggressive style has been good for the city. But on flood control, he's acting like a black-belt in a china shop. To protect the city from the Big One, SAFCA needs to move rapidly, but not sacrifice its long-term mission by pandering to the needs of the real estate industry.