



Natomas levee repairs will take a year longer, planners say

By Matt Weiser

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Strengthening levees in Sacramento's Natomas basin will require an additional year of construction, extending until 2011 the pain of a building moratorium and mandatory flood insurance. The news did not sit well with Natomas residents and builders. "I'm just outraged at this," said Rose Tribolet, board member and flood control liaison for the Natomas Community Association, a homeowners' group. "To me, this is just poor planning on their part. Now we are extending for another year the possibility of paying outrageous insurance."

Board members of the Sacramento Area Flood Control Association hear a report on the new developments at their meeting today at 3 p. m. Stein Buer, SAFCA executive director, said the main reason for the delay is a 2006 federal policy change requiring any physical change in an urban levee to be approved by officials at U.S. Army Corps of Engineers headquarters in Washington, D.C. This policy's effect on Natomas, he said, only recently became clear. "We didn't know how they would interpret and implement the new policy," said Buer. "What we're finding is, it means a very rigorous technical review going all the way up the food chain."

Previously, the work planned by SAFCA to bolster Natomas levees could be approved by the Army Corps district office in Sacramento. Headquarters approval, he said, will probably add a year to the construction schedule. The delay prompted an unusually strong reaction from Rep. Doris Matsui, D-Sacramento, who has worked closely with SAFCA and the corps to expedite Natomas levee repairs. "The Army Corps of Engineers continues to find reasons to cause delays for expediting the permits to protect 70,000 Natomas residents," Matsui said in a statement provided to The Bee. "People are at risk, and it is absolutely unacceptable that an additional year will be needed to get 100-year protection."

The need to bolster Natomas levees began with another Army Corps policy change in 2006, one that brought more rigorous seepage

criteria because of the discovery of porous materials in or under the levees. The corps ruled the basin does not meet the federal standard of 100-year protection, or the ability to withstand a flood with a 1 percent chance of striking in any given year. SAFCA settled on a design that involves raising and widening nearly 25 miles of levees.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency in January announced it will impose a new flood hazard rating on the basin that takes effect in December and creates a de facto building moratorium because it requires new construction to be raised 20 feet above ground – an economic deal-breaker. It also requires the holders of federally backed mortgages to buy flood insurance. If purchased after December, this will cost \$1,390 annually for \$250,000 in structure coverage, or \$769 if purchased sooner.

SAFCA's aggressive schedule called for obtaining preliminary FEMA approval of 100-year protection by mid-2010, which would end the moratorium and insurance mandate. It would then continue working toward 200-year protection. Another surprise, Buer said, is recent findings that levees confining drainage canals on the eastern edge of the Natomas Basin may also need significant seepage protection. Repairs will probably require building slurry walls deep within these levees, potentially adding \$100 million in project costs. SAFCA has cut costs by narrowing the levee design in some areas. It now estimates the total project will cost \$618 million, up from a March estimate of \$576 million.

The North State Building Industry Association released a study in May showing the building moratorium will cost the region 28,000 jobs and \$3.1 billion. "It is hard to do any long-term regional planning if there are outcomes such as this," said Dennis Rogers, the association's senior vice president of government and public affairs. "What is most important now is ensuring the new timeline is sustained."