

Y.C.F. Flood Prevention & Control RP 4/10/91 p. 124th Year

New assessment district planned for flood control

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Preventing flooding from the Pajaro River, Corralitos Creek and Salsipuedes Creek is going to take some studies, some bucks — and possibly a new assessment district, the Watsonville City Council was told last night.

The Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors has indicated its intent to form a "funding authority" to pay for flood control.

The Pajaro River Task Force has recommended that the county

and the city ask the Army Corps of Engineers to re-study flood control alternatives for the area. The process of planning any improvements could take seven years. There is virtually no way to raise local funds without a new assessment district, City Manager Steve Salomon told the council.

The proposed "Zone 7" would actually be a sub-zone of the county's Flood Control and Water Conservation Master Zone, county analyst Peter Cota-Robles said. Similar zones cover the Live Oak, San Lorenzo Valley and Aptos areas.

Zone 7 would coincide with the Pajaro Storm Drainage Maintenance District, or all the area where rain runoff heads toward the Pajaro River.

The area is bordered by Monterey, San Benito and Santa Clara counties, and cuts a diagonal line to the ocean through the Buzard Lagoon area. All of Watsonville would be included.

Each house, farm parcel and commercial parcel would be assessed a flat fee each year. The

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initially proposed fees would start in the first year at \$15 for houses, \$1.67 per acre of agricultural or vacant land, and \$100 for each commercial or industrial acre.

That would rise each year for eight years to \$60, \$6.66, and \$400, respectively. Apartment complexes would be treated as commercial property; duplexes and triplexes would be charged less than homes.

The money would go toward:

- Paying a portion of Army Corps of Engineers' studies and projects to revamp the area's levees;

- Paying for a number of localized drainage projects such as replacing too-small pumps and culverts to prevent smaller flooding; and

- Paying to maintain these projects.

The federal government would pay 75 percent of costs. The total cost of improving the levee would run between \$30 million and \$45 million, Cota-Robles said, and the county and city would have to pay at least \$6 million of that.

Former City Councilman Vido Deretich denounced the plan at

last night's meeting, saying the city had already given the county money for years to maintain the levee.

"Twenty-five years ago you would have just run two bulldozers down there," he said. "Now you have all these studies, and they're not accomplishing anything. Meanwhile we could all get flooded."

Cota-Robles told the council that when the Pajaro River levee was built in the 1950s, it was thought it could contain the kind of flood that was likely to occur every 50 years. In other words, there is a 2 percent chance of such a flood every year.

However, he said, it quickly became apparent that the levee was inadequate. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers now figures the levee could hold only a 25-year flood. Each year there is a 4 percent chance of such a flood. Spread out over the 30-year life of the average home mortgage, that's a high risk, Cota-Robles said.

Even if it were possible to clear out all the vegetation — and it's not allowed by Department of Fish and Game regulations — the levee still is too small to provide anything but 25-year protection, he said.

The City Council will continue last night's public hearing at its next meeting.