

Pajaro River bed sandbar clearing OK'd

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SANTA CRUZ — A \$350,000 plan to clear sandbars from the Pajaro River got the green light Tuesday from county officials.

At the same time, the Board of Directors of the Zone 7 Flood Control District told the county's Public Works Department to come up with a way to borrow the other \$3 million needed to clean out the river.

The clearing comes in the wake of disastrous early spring flooding that inundated farmland and houses throughout the area after the river ate through its levee walls.

A Monterey County resident worried the project would mean higher taxes, while a Sierra Club member urged the board to keep looking for a long-term solution that "integrates flood control and environmental values."

The board, which monitors flood control on the Santa Cruz County side of

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the river, includes Santa Cruz county's five supervisors and two Watsonville-area members.

The sand-bar clearing could start as early as July, said county Public Works Director John Fantham. Under a permit issued by the Army Corps of Engineers, the county has three years to complete the work. If the county can come up with the money, Fantham said, he expects to finish the work in one, or perhaps two years. Fantham is set to report on possible financing strategies during the June 19-28 county budget hearings.

Early estimates peg the total cost at \$3.5 million, Fantham said, but that

should mean no rate increase for those in the south county flood control district. Residents of single-family homes now pay \$30 a year for flood control. Farmers pay \$4 an acre, and commercial/industrial properties pay \$200 an acre. The rates automatically go up yearly through 1998.

This year's \$350,000 will at least let the county get started, Fantham said. If the Zone 7 money runs short, Fantham said, it will just mean putting off some planned minor projects.

Monterey County resident Hector Torres asked whether rumors were true of a tax increase to pay for the work.

No, said Ed Kelly, chairman of the board.

County Supervisor Ray Belgard of Watsonville elaborated.

"We had suggested that Monterey County expand its assessment district to include more people," Belgard said. The expanded district would raise more money, but individual assessments would not go up.

Torres thanked the board for all it has done. "Monterey County didn't help the flood victims at all," he said. "... I believe that Monterey County and Santa Cruz County should work together for a common solution."

Belgard said the two counties are set to meet next week to do just that.

Sierra Club representative Marilyn Hummel worried that sandbar removal may start as a temporary expediency but turn into an expensive and ongoing maintenance problem that would soak up all the money available.