

November 12, 2006

# After More Than a Century of Soaking, Washington Town Mulls Move to Higher Ground

By [WILLIAM YARDLEY](#)

HAMILTON, Wash., Nov. 9 — To move this tiny town to higher ground is not such a stretch for the short term. Residents here have done it for years when the big rains have come.

Roll up the rugs. Empty the kitchen cabinets. Put the good furniture on the second floor and hope the river does not rise that high. Then load up the RV and head north of Highway 20 to the church.

“They’re actually getting a little better at this, unfortunately,” said the Rev. Ron Edwards, the pastor of the First Baptist Church and a foul-weather host to many of Hamilton’s refugees.

Most of the about 300 residents of Hamilton repeated their weary routine this week, when an immense band of moisture, known as the Pineapple Express for its origins in tropical waters near Hawaii, dumped record rain and drove rivers to new heights across western Washington and Oregon. The storm killed three people, breached levees, flooded farms, washed out roads and forced hundreds of evacuations.

And here in Hamilton, 80 miles northeast of Seattle, where the Skagit River once again ignored its ostensible banks, where mud now slicks the ramp that Dave Thompson uses to roll his wheelchair to his front door, where “flood line” signs mark the head-high reach of the river in 2003, this last storm has renewed attention, and momentum, to the idea of moving Hamilton to higher ground for good.

“The only problem we have with it is that we don’t have a program that buys new town sites,” said Carl Cook, the mitigation director for the regional office of the [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#) in [Washington State](#).

And so the Hamilton Public Development Authority was born in 2004. The group, an agency created by the town with a board that includes representatives of local Indian tribes and the [Nature Conservancy](#), wants to move Hamilton, minus the mud, across Highway 20 to about 200 acres of private land on a dry hillside.

Supporters of the move say it would serve dual purposes: improving the lives of Hamilton residents,

many of whom cannot afford to move on their own, and improving the Skagit, home to one of the largest wintering colonies of bald eagles in the country and a spawning site for six species of salmon.

The greatest challenge now is buying the new land. Board members say it would cost about \$4 million, which they hope to raise from the federal and state government. But another challenge would be actually moving the people, not all of whom say they want to go.

“We’re too old to start over,” said Kathy Lipsey, 59, who moved to Hamilton with her husband, Ed, 64, a hay farmer, about 15 years ago. The couple knew about Hamilton’s history of flooding when they moved into a double-wide mobile home there. But the price was right.

This year they raised their house three feet, using hydraulic jacks and concrete blocks. “You always can convince yourself that you’re going to be a little better prepared than you are,” Mr. Lipsey said. “But the floods come differently each time.”

It has been a soggy century for Hamilton, which once thrived on coal mining and logging but fell into depression after the timber industry declined in the 1980s. Library archives have images of floods from the 1890s. On [skagitriverhistory.com](http://skagitriverhistory.com), there are links to newspaper articles about floods published as far back as 1896, when Hamilton was “totally inundated” by flooding.

The floods never stopped, but people stayed, rebuilding after floods as recent as 1990, 1995, 1996 and 2003.

FEMA estimates that it has spent at least \$10 million helping Hamilton recover over the years, but supporters of the move say the actual figure could be \$20 million or more. While Hamilton would not be the first river town in the nation to move, its plan for doing so is distinctive.

Over the course of 20 years, Hamilton’s riverfront lots would slowly slip from the map through a kind of land swap that is part environmentalism, part social engineering. The new town could have up to 400 lots.

No one would be forced to relocate, but the new development authority would buy property and help people move. The authority, said Patrick M. Hayden, a lawyer who is the part-time town attorney, would raise some money by selling land on the new town site and then use that money to buy property in the old part of town, preventing it from being developed again.

Residents of Hamilton and other parts of the Skagit River floodway could buy or rent in the new town site at discounted rates.

At the same time, the river, which twists 163 miles from British Columbia to the Puget Sound, would offer that much more undisturbed habitat along its banks.

Gayle Poole, a cook at Joy's Bakery in Sedro-Woolley, about 12 miles west, said she moved from Hamilton after the floods of 1995 and 1996. Ms. Poole said she knew some people had stayed in Hamilton solely to file claims with FEMA after each flood.

"To me it's stupid to keep pouring out the taxpayers' money when the solution's right there on that hill," she said, referring to the proposed new town site.

Mr. Cook, the FEMA official, acknowledged there was room for abuse but said, "There's an obligation on FEMA to make sure claims are paid."

Mr. Edwards, the pastor, said he believed few people were exploiting FEMA.

"By and large, they're the exceptions," he said. "The norm is that people don't have the money to move." As for residents who say they like life in Hamilton as it is and would not want to move to the new town, "I think that's kind of a smokescreen," Mr. Edwards said. "I think they would get out, if they knew they really could."

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