

Engineering map agitates Gages Slough controversy

By MARK MORROW
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BURLINGTON — There doesn't seem to be much argument about the folks who made the map. Just what it all means, though, is still the source of debate.

A map prepared by the East Coast engineering firm of Dames and Moore for the Federal Emergency Management Agency shows the area of Gages Slough would absorb some of the heaviest flood flows in the event of the so-called 100-year flood.

That, at least, is the way Nookachamps farmer and flood watcher Larry Kunzler reads it.

Kunzler says the map just about locks up his case for declaring Gages Slough a wetlands and a floodway — a case he expects to present in greater detail when the county holds a hearing on June 13.

Burlington City Engineer Bob Boudinot, however, is not so sure. Neither is Skagit County Planning Director Bob Schofield.

"I can't draw any conclusions that it's an area of heavy water," Boudinot said of the slough. "I don't have enough information to say it's a floodway."

"That's right," added Schofield. "You pay your money and take your chances. I don't see any connection between Gages Slough and the shorelines."

The map, which county planners and Burlington councilmen have already seen, depicts the levels of flooding which can be expected in the event of the 100-year flood. Shaded portions show the areas which can expect to be under a foot or less of water during such a flood. Gages Slough is not in such an area, according to the Dames and Moore map.

Gages Slough lies immediately

between two ridges and appears to Kunzler as a funnel which would divert flood waters right through the slough.

"There's no ifs, ands, or buts about it," Kunzler said. "It's a floodway. Because it's a floodway, it's a wetlands."

Designation as a wetlands could restrict development in the area around Gages Slough.

Boudinot said the fact Gages Slough is bordered by higher ground doesn't mean it's automatically either a wetlands or a floodway.

"Gages Slough is bracketed by higher ground. Therefore, it looks like a channel," he said.

The city council is set to hold a public hearing tonight on extension of a sewer line under Gages Slough to serve property along Garl Street south of Pease Road. And developers of the proposed Cascade Mall are trying to build a regional shopping mall on the very edge of the slough.

"If it's a floodway, you need post and pier construction which is very costly," Kunzler argued. "If I were a developer, why should I do that when I could go to Whatcom County?"

Schofield doesn't deny that Gages Slough has acted historically as a floodway. But he insists that would not necessarily still be the case should a major flood break out of the dikes along the Skagit River.

He told county officials recently that the slough is no longer connected directly to the Skagit River — disqualifying it for designation as an "associated wetlands" in the county's shoreline master program.

But Schofield also told county officials that Gages Slough was somehow overlooked in the shorelines designation process back in 1974-75.

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Map fuels slough controversy

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Boudinot conceded the Dames and Moore map has made new assumptions, and he has no argument with the research behind the map.

"They (Dames and Moore) developed a computer model for flood elevations. It's as accurate as the state of the art can provide," Boudinot said.

However, the only interpretation which Boudinot and Kunzler seem to agree on is that Interstate 5 will have a big effect on the 100-year flood.

Boudinot said the freeway would provide a "significant impact on the flood contours" and act much like a dam in restricting flood flow. He said the flood waters would be about six feet lower on the west side of the freeway than flood elevations on the east side.

Flood elevations east of the freeway would not change significantly from those first established by Army Corps of Engineers studies several years ago, Boudinot said.

The Corps study assumed the river dikes would be overtopped equally along their length, while the Dames and Moore study assumes that a major breach will occur east of town.

This would cause water to pool up at

the extreme south end of town near the dike, Boudinot said.

"Property west of the freeway has benefited (from the Dames and Moore study), but property is no worse off east of the freeway — except right up against the dike," Boudinot said.

Kunzler disagrees, claiming the freeway will act as a "weir" — a low level dam which only impedes the flow of the water over its top while pooling flood waters on the other side.

Property south of the central core of Burlington can expect to get between two and six feet of flood water if not in the map's shaded area, Kunzler said.

"A lot of people have bought this property by the freeway so they can develop it. But because of the freeway, they won't be able to develop it," Kunzler said. "Interstate 5 is actually Interweir 5."

Kunzler believes this is no time to build a sewer connection across Gages Slough. The question of preserving Gages Slough is much more important, he says.

"I'm not against development," Kunzler said. "This river has to be managed properly. It's not being managed now. Who bails out these areas when they're damaged by floods? The

taxpayers do."

But Boudinot sees no problem. An 18-inch water line already runs alongside Garl Street which crosses the slough. The proposed sewer line would be placed eight feet under the slough, he explained.

"If it gets washed out, there will be a new river there," Boudinot said. "That (damage to a sewer line) will be the least of our worries."

Even if classified eventually as a wetlands, Gages Slough would probably be designated by local authorities as an "urban shoreline," meaning a sewer line could still be built there, Boudinot said.

"Some people think that once a wetland is declared, it's like the Padilla Sanctuary. They should read through the shoreline master program," Boudinot said.

Kunzler believes city officials are having a hard time facing reality because the decision to develop South Garl Street was already made years ago.

"The people in charge are realtors. They want to sell it to develop it."

"There are realtors trying to make a last-minute, big-time commission," Kunzler added. "With a sewer, the land becomes more developable."