

Vocal Kunzler quits flood control panel

By MARK MORROW
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MOUNT VERNON — Larry Kunzler is saying his goodbyes to the Skagit County Flood Control Advisory Committee.

Kunzler, an advocate of floodplain management, turned in his resignation Wednesday. He had been an outspoken member of the advisory committee as a representative from the Nookachamps/Clear Lake area ever since the committee's formation in 1980.

Calling the 21-member Flood Control Advisory Committee "a failure to the people of Skagit County," Kunzler outlined his gripes and his ideas for better flood control in a letter to committee Chairman Jess Knutzen.

Kunzler said his recent move to a new location south of Mount Vernon was the primary reason for his stepping down, but he nevertheless left with a few parting shots on behalf of the "Burlington Bypass" and said the current advisory committee is off on the wrong track in trying to sell the idea of a dam on the Sauk River.

"A dam on the Sauk River is out not only because of the 'Wild and Scenic' designation, but also because it is engineeringly impossible to build a concrete structure that would provide 100-year flood protection in that area," Kunzler said.

"For the committee to waste any more time on the Sauk River Dam would be a great injustice to the people of Skagit County."

According to Kunzler, the old plan to build a man-made channel along the course of Gages Slough from a point just east of Burlington and on out to Padilla Bay makes more sense.

He is supported in that claim by Bill Spurlock, chief of flood plain management services for the Army Corps of Engineers.

The bypass plan, formerly called the Avon Bypass proposal, might not be the only way to prepare for a major flood, but it also is among the "more reasonable approaches," Spurlock said.

"Gages Slough obviously carried the flood flow before, and it would again," Spurlock said.

Spurlock said serious talk of a bypass died 20 years ago because of difficulties in getting rights of way and easements from local

property owners.

"You talk with those farmers out there and they're not about to dedicate their land to an Avon Bypass," Spurlock said. "And a lot of development has taken place since that time."

Spurlock said local citizens have a false sense of security because local officials are denying there's any hazard associated with development around Gages Slough.

"Really, there sure is," Spurlock said. "He (Kunzler) has done his homework. He's very knowledgeable."

Until such a bypass is built, Kunzler said, the only other responsible option is floodplain management — or an exercise in "common sense." Local jurisdictions have had terrible land use records, Kunzler charged, and he cited Burlington's approval of the Cascade regional shopping mall and plans to widen Garl Street to five lanes in the middle of a flood flow path as prime examples.

"Just because the Burlington City Council has sold out the safety of their residents is no reason that the Flood Control Committee should sit on the sidelines and allow the Samish River farming community to receive the bulk of the ... overflow," Kunzler said.

Kunzler also called for the committee to be completely independent of any urban or public works department influence. Currently, the committee has members from various cities and diking districts.

"These are the people who caused the problems," Kunzler said.

Committee chairman Knutzen said he, too, was disappointed that there had not been greater progress, but he noted that committee members were only advisory and served at the pleasure of the county commissioners.

"We don't have the answers," Knutzen said. "We have the assurance (from county commissioners) it's not a dead issue." He also said a majority of committee members disagreed with Kunzler on the importance of the Sauk River project. Most still feel it's "high priority," he said.

Knutzen praised Kunzler as an important part of the committee whose attendance was much better than that of some members.