

## Kunzler has only begun his flood fight

*Larry Kunzler is a self-acclaimed civic activist. He first started in Florida working for civil rights and has progressed to today working to prevent building in the floodplain of the Skagit River. He takes his work and activism seriously, although he has the good sense to laugh at himself and others, tempering his feisty remarks with grins and laughs. The 37-year-old is married and has one child.*

*Currently he is working on a college degree in legal assistance work from Edmonds Community College. He was forced to sell his Nookachamps farm because of a back injury. Kunzler admits that his new vocation stems from his work as an activist in Skagit County.*

**Argus:** Why did you start becoming interested in flooding?

**Kunzler:** Well, mother nature gave me a real quick lesson. I bought my farm in April of '75 and in December of '75 I had four and a half to five feet of water in my front yard. I figured, that perhaps, this is something I should learn something more about.

**Argus:** No one told you that that area flooded every winter?

**Kunzler:** Well, I was told by the realtor that it hadn't flooded since 1951 and it would never flood again because of the dams and controls they had on the river. Being from Florida, I knew a lot about hurricanes and didn't know anything about floods. I had a good buy on the farm — now I know why — and I went ahead and purchased it.

I might throw this in as a sideline. It wasn't because of the flooding that I left the Nookachamps. If you are going to farm, it's something you're just going to have to put up with. Farmers are perhaps the only people who should be living in the floodplain. They're not the ones causing the problems. The restrictions that come about because of floodplain regulations shouldn't really apply to farmers to the same degree they should apply to say, the city of Burlington, to whose every street is subject to flooding. And, you've got a larger congregation of people.

**Argus:** Are you the most knowledgeable flood expert in the valley?

**Kunzler:** Woo — I tend to shy away from the word expert. I heard a good joke about that one time. If you break the word down, ex is a has-been and spert is a drip under pressure. So, I stay away from the term expert. I will say that I don't believe anyone in this county has spent the time, or the energy or the money that I have in researching the flood issue. I never pass up the opportunity to talk to anyone about the floods. It is something that for too long has been ignored. By, regretfully, our

generation.

I'm guilty of telling people things they don't want to hear. But, yet, one of the main motivating factors behind my involvement, is that no one — locally, state or federal government — has ever said, you're wrong Mr. Kunzler, because. Until I'm proven wrong, there's no reason for me to back off of this issue.

**Argus:** What do you think the average Skagitonian thinks about flooding?

**Kunzler:** They think, as I said, that floods are something Grandpa talked about. The truth of the matter is mother nature took a 24-year holiday. In the eyes of mother nature, that's comparable to you or I taking the afternoon off to watch the Seahawks whoop on the Raiders. She's been here for 17,000 years that this valley's been created. And, she's been changing this valley for 17,000 years. The amount of time that mortal man spends on the face of this earth is insignificant — comparable to one

grain of sand on a sandy beach.

**Argus:** Do you think some locals are put off by you — a non-Skagitonian — telling them about their river?

**Kunzler:** I am so glad you asked me that. Yes, they are. I feel there are places in this county where if you've lived here less than 80 years you're still an outsider. But, that's a ridiculous argument. My response to that is: one, I was a floodplain resident; two, I'm a taxpayer; three, registered voter; and four, Vietnam veteran. If anyone has a right to speak about floods, why shouldn't it be me?

others with regards to the flood issue.

Specifically, in the lower valley, the area adjacent to Gages Slough and the areas adjacent to the freeway where the water will flow over the top of it do not have the same conditions as say the area out in Bow, or the people in south Mount Vernon.

There's different types of flooding. There is what the federal government calls sheet-flow flooding, which means the water gently rises. Then there is flow patch flooding which means the very destructive force of that river is carried.

**Argus:** Is that the one you're worried about?

**Kunzler:** Yes. It's one that's been overlooked for too many years. Several old timers, and

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This is still the United States. The law treats all of us equally, or it should. That's a ridiculous redneck argument. That because you weren't born or raised here you don't have the right to speak and you don't have the right to influence local government decisions and you don't have a right to be involved. That's nonsense. I've always laughed whenever I've heard that. In fact, I feel sorry for the people who try and put that argument forth because they don't understand government.

**Argus:** You get a lot of verbal and sometimes physical abuse at public hearings. Why do you put up with it? Why don't you just stay out of issues?

**Kunzler:** That's kind of a coward's way out, isn't it? That's saying that because the issue I'm involved with is unpopular, that I shouldn't be involved with it. You could say the same argument to the civil rights workers in the 60s, of which I was a part.

**Argus:** Should people other than farmers be building in the floodplain?

**Kunzler:** With certain restrictions, yes they could.

**Argus:** Such as?

**Kunzler:** Such as post and pier construction. Such as recognizing that some areas of our valley are not equal to

I've used the old timers in Skagit County — people plus 60 years in age that are the walking history books in this county — and I've based a lot of my involvement with what they've told me. And old newspaper articles from your paper and the Skagit Valley Herald.

When you get water traveling in excess of five feet per second, it has the power to lift houses off their foundations, to dig out roads, to scour the earth.

**Argus:** Has the Skagit flowed that fast before?

**Kunzler:** Yes. That's what created Gages Slough. More recently, the flood, I believe it was 1979, that went across Cockerham Island dug out a trench in some places 20 feet deep, several hundred feet wide. That river was travelling in excess of five feet per second. Just imagine that it happened in downtown Burlington. How many roads would have been ripped up, how many homes would have been washing away?

**Argus:** So there's no danger to downtown Mount Vernon?

**Kunzler:** Sure there is. Especially west side Mount Vernon.

But, growth over there looks like it's being controlled.

People have asked 'how come you aren't against the mall in

Continued on page 5

000546

July 31, 84

3-5

'I'm not anti-growth'

## Kunzler talks of floods, CFOG

Continued from page 3

Mount Vernon?' If that was an open field there, I'd be against it. But, they have for all intensive purposes, destroyed that as a conveyance area. Water won't flow through there. It will go there, however.

There are some old timers who have said they have seen seven, eight feet of water where the Payless store sits. Now, because of the landfill they've put it, that water is going to be just like a ping pong ball, it's going to be going back and forth. The effect of it will be to throw the flows further out into the loop.

**Argus:** If you could control floodplain management in this area, what would you do?

**Kunzler:** I'd prohibit — oh boy, what an opportunity! — any and all landfill in and immediately adjacent to Gages Slough. No landfill east or west of Interstate 5 where the flood flows are going to go across it. I'd prohibit building encroachment within 200 feet of the

dikes and levies, 'cause those dikes and levies — all it takes is a rabbit, a mole, a dog, a farmer with a stick of dynamite any of those natural causes — and those levies could give way. If you build within 200 feet of that levy, you're gone.

I would make it a county ordinance that realtors, before they accept any earnest money down on a piece of property, they would have to identify one, the area as being subject to flooding and they would have to send that person to the Skagit County courthouse and get some kind of signed document that would tell the seriousness of the flooding problem in relationship to the piece of property he or she wants to buy. I think property owners have a right to know that.

**Argus:** Don't the levies or dams provide enough flood protection?

**Kunzler:** No. The fact of the matter is that the levies only provide a maximum of 14-year flood protection.

**Argus:** Will we ever be safe from this disasterous flooding?

**Kunzler:** Well, it depends.

What has to be done in this county is an adjustment to this flooding. Everytime you put a truckload of dirt in the floodplain, the water goes someplace else. And suppose you're next door.

*"Farmers are perhaps the only people who should be living in the flood plain."*



The best example of ignoring the flood issue is the building

of I-5. When I asked the Department of Transportation, "Why didn't you take the Skagit River flood flows into account when you built the freeway?" The response I got, in writing, is that "regulations didn't require us to when we built the freeway."

I don't consider that a good argument. I consider that a tribute to stupidity. I looked into this. The record will show that it was the city of Burlington and the city of Mount Vernon that put political pressure on the state Department of Transportation to move that freeway to its current location. They were afraid of bypassing the business districts.

**Argus:** How did CFOG (Citizens for Orderly Growth) start?

**Kunzler:** It was founded by a gentleman by the name of Bob Rose who was involved with the preservation of, I think it was Heart Lake, over in Anacortes.

There were a bunch of condominiums planned and he

000547

July 31, 84 ARWS 4/5

went out to stop them, and he did. He realized that there were many battles going on in Skagit County that were all basically the same but they involved different organizations. There was the Nookachamp Flood Defense Fund, The Bow Hill Neighborhood Association, the Skagitonians Concerned About Nuclear Power.

There was just a plethora of county groups who were fighting individual fights which all came under the same category — land-use planning. His idea, and I think it was a good one, was to take representatives from each of those organizations and form a council, kind of like the Washington Environmental Council.

**Argus:** Is CFOG anti-growth?

**Kunzler:** Let me make one thing plain — I can't speak for CFOG because I haven't attended a meeting in approximately a year and a half.

**Argus:** Well, then let me ask, are you anti-growth?

**Kunzler:** No, not at all, so long as the growth takes care of and addresses the environmental issues, the flood issues, the economic and social issues. In other words, so long as growth follows the SEPA laws



*"The best example of ignoring the flood issues is the building of I-5."*

of the state of Washington, the State Environmental Policy Act.

There's been many areas of growth in the county that you haven't seen Larry Kunzler oppose. That's one thing that's kind of bad. Perhaps if I had a recommendation to CFOG to kind of clean up their image, it would be to favor some responsible growth.

**Argus:** Is a special interest group like CFOG have the right to thwart the will of what seems to be the majority of

Skagitonians?

**Kunzler:** I have to take issue with two things that you just said.

One, I don't believe the majority of people in Skagit County are in favor of the Cascade Mall.

Secondly, I have a hard time labeling the Citizens for Orderly Growth as a special interest group. To me, my definition of a special interest group is someone who stands to make a buck — and there are a lot of those that are involved in favor of the shopping center. The Skagit County Board of Realtors — they're deeply involved.

So, I don't believe that CFOG meets the definition of a special interest group. If you're saying that being concerned about the environment, Skagit County and the future of the valley as we know it, is a special interest, then, yeah, they're a special interest group. But if you're saying that anyone in the Citizens For Orderly Growth, that I know of, stands to make any money on this, the answer is no, they're not a special interest group.

**Argus:** Is CFOG financed by

mall developers in Mount Vernon or Bellingham?

**Kunzler:** I again have not attended a CFOG meeting for a year and a half. I know that while I was a member — I did resign — all of their contributions that I knew of came from John Doe, citizen on the street. There was no special interest group. There was no attempt to solicit funds.

**Argus:** Then how can you afford the attorney's fees.

**Kunzler:** They've held several public auctions. They've asked for donations. They've sent out letters to various environmental groups that are concerned about some of the same issues they are.

Again, to my knowledge, there is nothing covert about their operations.

**Argus:** Why did you resign?

**Kunzler:** At the time, there were several reasons.

I disagreed with the strategy being used by the organization. There were some major arguments and battles and I came out on the short end of the stick. Yet, in the public's eye, I was the one being blamed for those decisions. I was the one running CFOG, and I wasn't.