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Forum editorial: Be careful with river setbacks

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The city should not.

First, the lessons learned since 1997 cannot be ignored. The cost of flooding in taxpayer dollars and individual heartache has been very high. Two more major floods after 1997 reinforced the lesson. It's simple: Stay the hell away from the river!

Second, the city has invested tens of millions of dollars in flood control, home buyouts and planning for a diversion. Much of that effort has resulted in clearing developed areas near the river for greenways and parks. It's been a smart and successful program. Eroding that success by granting even one river development waiver would be a mistake, and could be the slippery slope.

Third, Fargo has a less-than-admirable history of the tail wagging the dog. That is, for too many years, building and development policies were all but dictated to the city by builders and developers. Results of having built in the wrong places include the city trauma of fighting floods to protect riverside properties, and the associated expenses incurred by taxpayers in the past three floods.

The stealth logic in granting a river development waiver is that the diversion will take certain tracts out of the flood-risk zone. But if construction on the project started today, it would be at least 10 years before completion. How many times will the Red flood during that decade? How many properties would be at risk if development were allowed within the new setback lines? Who would pay to protect them?

The city is trying to avoid costly legal entanglements. But lawsuits or not, the city cannot condone irresponsibility. Anyone who's been paying attention knows the risk the river poses. That risk is not going away soon. The city's smartest options are clear: Fight a lawsuit or two as vigorously as possible. Buy up empty lots in vulnerable areas. But don't get back into a situation where public money has to be spent to protect and/or buy out expensive riverside properties. The city's been there, done that.

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