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Letter: Use flood stages honestly

On Dec. 23, the official gauge for the Red River at Wahpeton, N.D., will raise its flood stage from 10 to 11 feet; it will also increase "moderate" and "major" stages by one foot each.

By: **Blain Johnson**, INFORUM

On Dec. 23, the official gauge for the Red River at Wahpeton, N.D., will raise its flood stage from 10 to 11 feet; it will also increase "moderate" and "major" stages by one foot each. What is with the change? The stages are set by the officials of the jurisdictional boundary in which the gauge is placed, in cooperation with the local National Weather Service, meaning the Wahpeton City Council and Richland County emergency manager are responsible for the change. The change was passed due to increased protection and investment Wahpeton and Breckinridge have accomplished since 1997 to combat major flooding; the new levels reflect better protected and prepared cities.

Of all the cities in the area that have spent money on flood protection in recent years, Fargo and Moorhead top the list. Since 2009, 25 miles of permanent levees have been constructed in the two cities, and more than \$200 million has been spent on increased protection – \$107 million from Fargo and \$88 million from Moorhead. In 1997, a 38-foot flood would require 670,000 sandbags to protect 140 flood-prone Moorhead homes. Today, that number would be just 33,000 sandbags to protect eight homes. The situation is similar in Fargo.

After the 2013 "flood," the National Weather Service's Grand Forks office approached Fargo about changing flood stages; the city said "No, thank you." Why would a city that has charged a half-cent sales tax over the past three years, at the cost of millions of dollars to local taxpayers, choose not to have these funds reflected in a more prepared community by raising flood stage?

According to the NWS, the only real effect of a flood under 22 feet is Elm Street, which goes under around 18 feet, the basis for the current flood stage. So 300 yards of Elm Street cause enough of a disruption to a city of nearly 50 square miles to justify a "flood"? The change is such an easy process. What could be the reason for not doing it?

Fargo spent \$2 million to prepare its residents for the 2013 flood, which at 38 feet would have been the fifth-highest flood on record. The amount is less than 1,000 times the cost of the proposed diversion, meaning we could hit 38 feet for 1,000 years before justifying the cost of the project. The 1997 flood that devastated Grand Forks cost the city \$2.1 billion, adjusted for inflation. That begs the question: If the city of Fargo were to suddenly stop current mitigation projects, and the river happens to get as high as 2009, and the dikes happen to fail, and the failure happens in a spot that would flood a large section of town, would the city even incur enough damage to justify the original cost of a diversion?

I would not consider signing off on a plan like that. The cost/benefit ratio is too low. The flood stage should be raised from 18 to 22 feet, moderate stage from 25 to 29 feet, and major stage from 30 to 34 feet. The change would have made this past spring a moderate flood, a term everyone who lives in the area would likely agree was based on preparedness and disruption levels.

Nobody wants to fight a flood every year, but did we really "fight" the 2013 flood, which was technically 3 feet over major flood stage? Perhaps it was simply the fanfare around the possibility of a large flood.

The costs of flood mitigation at the 38-40 foot levels is so tiny compared to the cost of a diversion, it is laughable. Instead of choosing to protect against something that has never happened and may never happen, perhaps it is best to continue to chip away at local projects that could protect the city to 41 feet at much less cost than a diversion.

So what is behind refusal to change stages on the Red in Fargo? Is it because the 300 yards of Elm Street is such an integral part of the city's infrastructure that a rise to 18 feet can be considered a key disruption? Or is the refusal rooted in a deeper plan that involves a costly flood protection project for Fargo to seemingly prevent the "major" floods?


Flood stages should be used as tools for awareness, not as bargaining chips to subvert citizens and legislators. Follow Wahpeton's lead and adopt more representative flood stages at Fargo.

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