



Letter: Say 'no' to those working against flood protection

By Clay Dietrich on Jun 25, 2015 at 12:52 a.m.

Floods are not easily averted, but when we succeed, they seem to be easily forgotten: I was thankful to read last week about a poll in Moorhead reminding people that we still have worries to face. It was not so long ago that Moorhead residents fought side-by-side with our neighbors and neighboring state to defend against a flood that threatened us all. While we are all better-prepared today due to home buyouts and levees that have been completed, the risk of a bigger flood is still alive and it is why Moorhead and Fargo are planning for the F-M diversion. The memory of our joint efforts in 2009 is what we need as our phones ring with polls run by those who don't even live here.

Dream homes

During the flood of 2009, I served as an assistant fire chief for Moorhead. Our fire department managed construction of the city-long sandbag levee, and I was appointed operations chief of the project. We won that fight. We won because we didn't care who was next to us, what development they lived in, or even what state they called home. We were just thankful to have the help.

Fast forward to today: I am no longer an assistant fire chief. My employees and I build people their dream homes. These past two weeks have been trying for my business, my employees and my trade partners as we work to build homes for those being displaced for flood protection in the city of Oxbow. Our customers, with their plans and lives on hold, face uncertainty we can only imagine. As president of the Home Builders Association of Fargo-Moorhead, I have reached out to area leaders and to my neighbors who fought alongside me

in 2009. I have reminded them of why we fought to build that flood protection then, and why now, when the river is low, we need to try even harder to complete the permanent levees required to protect our neighbors.

Levee width

Recently a federal judge ruled in a case brought by the Wilkin / Richland Joint Powers Association that the ring dike levee under construction in Oxbow needed to cease construction until the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources completed its FEIS (Final Environmental Impact Statement) and adequacy determination of the F-M diversion. The state also has concerns because the width of Oxbow's levees are greater than that of a levee protecting from a 100-year flood event.

Remember, when we designed and constructed the protection in Moorhead, the levees were purposely designed with a 500-year levee base width and at least a 10-foot flat top at the 100-year levee height; this created a position from which to defend against a flood greater than a 100-year event. We know there are bigger floods out there. Our flood in 2009 crested at 40.84 feet, well over the current 100-year flood height of 39.5 feet. When those bigger floods come, the only way to adequately add additional emergency levee protection is if the base and top of the levee is wide enough to accommodate those additions. Moorhead and its residents would not be thriving like we are today without the construction of our permanent flood protection.

Stopping the flood protection efforts in Oxbow hasn't just put that city at risk. These actions have created economic uncertainty, financial impacts and potential layoffs for my employees, my fellow builders' employees, and our trade partners. Yes, these are the risks we take as business owners. However, it is wrong to be opposed by the same regulatory agency (Minnesota DNR) that encouraged removal of many homes from Moorhead's floodway, and to build a levee similar to Oxbow's, and to have our hands tied for helping those owners sacrificing their homes so their neighbors can be protected.

Speak up

I remember each and every one of those faces next to me in 2009 as we saved our city. I cannot help but think of their expressions if they had known that in such a short time, some of our upstream neighbors would be actively plotting to destroy the actions to protect our homes and cities from the water that comes from their region during a flood. This issue is about more than just protecting my trade partners, employees or the employees of the other 17 builder businesses providing a service to those being displaced from their homes.

This is about our need for flood protection, the F-M diversion, and to speak up against those who are working against it, and saying, “No, I don’t think I am going to idly sit by and let our community be threatened by flood waters that come to us from you, and the watershed area that feeds the Red River of the North.”

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