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Fargo hopes to fill another 500,000 sandbags as wet snow raises flood threat

FARGO – Sandbag Central will return to action as the city gears up for a flood fight that took on a new urgency after heavy wet snow blanketed the Red River Valley.

By: **Patrick Springer**, INFORUM

FARGO – Sandbag Central will return to action as the city gears up for a flood fight that took on a new urgency after heavy wet snow blanketed the Red River Valley.

At Monday's City Commission meeting, Mayor Dennis Walaker announced that he has directed the reactivation of Sandbag Central, with plans to fill another 500,000 sandbags, adding to about 1.3 million already in reserve.

"This is an anomaly," Walaker said, referring to the weather conditions, including a snowstorm that dumped about an inch of moisture in the southern Red River Valley.

City officials said they were advised by National Weather Service officials not to wait to begin building flood protections until forecasters issue a flood crest prediction.

The concern is that heavy rains could coincide with the melt of significant snow and a rapid rise in temperatures, leaving the city with no time to raise its levees.

"Time, in my opinion, is of the essence," Walaker said. "We do this with a certain amount of reluctance. It's not always simple to get the sandbag operation running again."

After heavy snow fell Sunday and early Monday – and with another possible storm later this week – forecasters warned that chances of exceeding a 38-foot flood had escalated.

The most recent outlook, issued last month, had predicted a 50 percent chance of a crest higher than 38.1 feet, a 25 percent chance of exceeding 39.1 feet and a 5 percent chance of topping 41.3 feet.

Mark Ewens, a senior weather analyst for the National Weather Service, said the wet Sunday-Monday snowstorm, as well as the possibility of another storm later this week, heighten the chances of exceeding a 38-foot flood.

Ewens said there now is a greater chance of reaching crests earlier predicted as being in the 20 percent or 30 percent range. He said a new outlook would be issued today or Wednesday.

Earlier, the city planned to build its flood protection to 40 feet in order to defend against a 38-foot flood with 2 feet of free board.

Details about the resumption of Sandbag Central were not announced at Monday's meeting. With 500,000 of the bags going to Cass County, the city-run sandbag-making operation filled 1,081,600 bags in nine days of operation before it closed Friday.

The meeting Monday was dominated by arguments over how to defend the flood-prone Oakcreek neighborhood in south Fargo. A divided commission voted to demolish eight homes in Oakcreek to allow construction of a temporary clay levee.

The commission's majority, prevailing by a vote of 3 to 2, rejected criticisms it was making a "knee-jerk" decision in settling a controversy over what to do with the flood buyout homes the city owns in Oakcreek.

Commissioner Brad Wimmer complained that the issue of demolishing the homes – all bought out earlier by the city – had not been on the regular agenda, and notice to the Oak Creek neighborhood went out by Code RED text alert half an hour before the meeting.

"It's a little bit unethical, I believe," Wimmer said.

Commissioner Tim Mahoney disagreed, saying the possibility the issue might be taken up in Monday's meeting had been raised earlier. He said the city needed to take swift action to prepare against what appears to be a worsening flood.

Walaker, Mahoney and Commissioner Melissa Sobolik voted to demolish the homes to allow construction of a clay dike instead of large trap bags filled with sand.

They sided with Mark Bittner, the city's director of engineering, who argued forcefully that the city should not take any chances in fighting a flood that forecasters have said will be shaped by factors placing the area in "uncharted territory."

The late thaw, the result of persistent colder-than-normal weather and recent heavy snows, leave the city vulnerable to heavy rains during an extended melt – a combination Bittner noted proved devastating to Minot in the 2011 flood.

"We need to make a decision on this right now," he said, rejecting suggestions from Wimmer and Commissioner Mike Williams that the city should try to save the houses.

Wimmer said the eight houses were worth an estimated total of \$7 million to \$8 million. However, city buyout homes have fetched nowhere near their assessed value at prior auctions. They're often purchased merely for salvaging, city officials say.

Areas of the city have been well defended in the past by building clay levees that later were topped by sandbags to protect against higher floods than originally predicted, Williams said, arguing that there was no immediate need to demolish the homes.

City Engineer April Walker said a study of soil stability raised doubts about building a clay levee behind the homes, raising the possibility of a dike failure if built with the homes in place.

Oak Creek neighbors were divided, and echoed comments made at earlier meetings. Some argued on behalf of saving the homes and using trap bags filled with sand, or building a clay dike behind the homes.

Others said it was time to dispense with temporary flood protection for Oak Creek, a stream that drains 38 sections of land near Horace, and advocated demolishing the buyout homes.

Walaker said his own view of the impending flood threat has changed even since a drive of the southern valley on Saturday for his latest flood reconnaissance, when conditions appeared generally favorable.

The picture changed drastically with the Sunday and Monday's storm, which dumped 8.8 inches of snow with 0.84 inches of moisture in Fargo, according to official amounts. An unofficial reading in south Fargo had 10.8 inches of snow containing 1.15 inches of moisture.

"Floods are dynamic," Walaker said. "We have to make decisions."

Sobolik cast the deciding vote to demolish the homes, a decision she said was warranted by the changing weather conditions and escalating flood outlook.

"I can't with good conscience take a risk," she said, comparing the move to securing insurance. "I just can't do that to the rest of Fargo."

Readers can reach Forum reporter Patrick Springer at (701) 241-5522

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