

NEWS

Diversion prompts growing pains for Fargo

A proposed Red River flood diversion channel in North Dakota would safeguard land for several miles north and south of Fargo, giving the city plenty of room to grow.

Written By: news@grandforksherald.com | Apr 25th 2010 - 9am.



A cornfield, in the shadow of Davies High School in south Fargo, abuts a new development. Michael Vosburg / Forum Photo Editor

A proposed Red River flood diversion channel in North Dakota would safeguard land for several miles north and south of Fargo, giving the city plenty of room to grow.

But what about the undeveloped land already within city limits? Could it be better used to encourage denser growth before the city sprawls even farther to the north and south?

City Commissioner Mike Williams has asked city planners for an analysis he hopes will help answer that question.

Fargo Planning Director Jim Gilmour is confident the city has enough property zoned as commercial to last well over 20 years.

He's not as optimistic about how long the city's residential land can sustain growth.

"If that is eight years, and the diversion's 10 years away, then we're going to kind of hit the wall in terms of development," he said. "Development in the metro area would continue to happen, but it would be more in West Fargo and Moorhead."

Planners hope to present a growth outlook to the Planning Commission and City Commission in May.

Gilmour estimates a diversion, whether on the North Dakota or Minnesota side of the river, would take enough land out of the floodplain to accommodate an additional 40 years of growth for Fargo.

Williams believes Fargo could encourage more residential growth in existing commercial areas by offering incentives for multi-use developments that would make better use of streets and other infrastructure already in place.

"I think Mother Nature's forcing our hand a little bit, which is good because before it was, 'Well, heck, buy cheap land and skip over the other stuff.' Well, that is harder to protect," he said.

Williams has asked planners to count not only properties zoned as residential in the city's current footprint but also how much commercial land the city could target for multi-use development.

Currently, Fargo has nearly 650 vacant lots ready for new single-family homes and another 65 lots for 130 twinhome units, according to Gilmour.

An additional 289 lots are platted but not yet served by infrastructure such as utilities and roads.

That's a total of 1,065 lots - enough to sustain about two and a half years of growth, based on the average of 407 building permits issued annually for single-family, twinhome and row house units since 1990.

Williams said planners last week estimated that the city's total residentially zoned areas - both platted and unplatted - could support 12,000 residences, counting both single family and multifamily. He wants planners to count undeveloped commercially zoned property, as well as underdeveloped existing property, that could be partially converted to mixed-use with residential.

"We do want to secure future growth areas," he said, "but I think this really is an opportunity in this interim as we develop more comprehensive water management also to look at how do we want to grow this city in the most efficient, attractive manner."

The proposed North Dakota diversion channel, which would start north of Oxbow and wrap around Horace and West Fargo before re-entering the Red River near Georgetown, Minn., would open up hundreds of acres south and north of Fargo for potential development by removing them from the 100-year floodplain for insurance purposes.

Some of those parcels would likely get caught in a tug-of-war over who should annex and develop them, especially now that Fargo's agreements with Harwood, Briarwood and Reile's Acres over where each city can extend its zoning authority have expired, Gilmour said.

"Whose jurisdiction that is in is going to be probably the subject of disputes," he said.

Proceeding with caution

Until a diversion or other form of permanent flood protection is in place, developing land in Fargo will carry a higher price tag.

This summer, the Federal Emergency Management Agency is slated to release a revised flood insurance rate map that will likely bring 7,500 to 7,600 Fargo properties into the 100-year floodplain, mostly south of Interstate 94 and east of 45th Street, Fargo City Engineer Mark Bittner said.

Homeowners with mortgages in those areas would be required to buy flood insurance when the map is finalized, which is expected to take more than a year.

Bittner said he plans to recommend that new structures built in the revised floodplain area must be removed from it by elevating the structures with earthen fill. Gilmour said building ring dikes could be another way to protect developments until permanent protection is in place.

"What you can't tell them is 'Go ahead and develop and we're just going to let it flood,' " he said.

The cost of such flood-proofing measures will likely get passed on to homebuyers, potentially making development in Fargo less attractive than West Fargo and Moorhead, which are better protected.

Given Fargo's limited supply of land for residential development, Gilmour said city leaders may want to think about increasing house density, which saves on infrastructure costs and the long-term expense of providing city services.

In 2005, only 4 percent of land in Fargo was classified as mid- to high-density residential, compared with 16 percent that was low- to mid-density, according to Fargo's long-range growth plan adopted in 2007.

"If you only have so many acres of land left that can be protected that's out of the floodplain, you'd want to be even more cautious about how you develop that," Gilmour said.

Neighbors roomier

West Fargo also has barriers to growth: Horace to the south, Fargo to the east and the Sheyenne Diversion to the west and north.

However, city Planning Director Larry Weil said a comprehensive growth plan completed in 2008 shows the city has room to accommodate another 15,000 to 20,000 residents.

How quickly that land fills in will depend on whether West Fargo sustains its rapid growth rate. The city ballooned from 14,940 people in 2000 to an estimated 26,000 people today, Weil said.

Based on the current growth rate and land stock, Weil projected the city could sustain residential growth for 15 to 20 years.

Additional areas of development could open up in West Fargo if a Red River diversion channel is built in North Dakota. Corps engineers say the channel would cross the Sheyenne and Maple

rivers and could pick up the overflows that cause chronic overland flooding issues in areas west and north of the Sheyenne Diversion.

Meanwhile, Moorhead doesn't share its neighbors' growth concerns.

Moorhead City Engineer Bob Zimmerman said the city has ample potential growth areas to the south, east and north that won't be in the floodplain, with or without a diversion.

The only limit to expansion will be extending city services and, if a diversion is built on the Minnesota side, reaching across it with bridges and utilities, he said. The city extended its municipal utilities a few years ago, making up to 3,000 acres available for development, he said.

"We don't have really any kind of a roadblock in the way," he said.

Still, Moorhead sees the need for a North Dakota diversion, he said, because existing areas of the city are vulnerable to a 100-year flood, and one-third to one-half of Moorhead would be threatened in a 500-year flood.

"We're definitely supportive of doing it," he said.

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