

NEWS

F-M diversion: Upstream residents frustrated

CHRISTINE, N.D.

Written By: news@inforum.com | Nov 14th 2011 - 11pm.

CHRISTINE, N.D. - Residents living south of the proposed Red River diversion had questions for Fargo-Moorhead leaders, but they didn't like the answers they received Monday night.

About 150 rural residents who oppose the project grilled Diversion Authority officials for nearly three hours about their concerns.

Many of the questions couldn't be answered thoroughly, though, because numerous details remain unknown, because the \$1.78 billion diversion is still being designed and its impacts assessed.

But residents negatively impacted by the proposed diversion said those unknowns weren't acceptable.

"We continue to hear: 'It hasn't been finalized.' ... This project is too far along to not have these answers," said Nathan Berseth, spokesman for the MnDak Upstream Coalition, which hosted Monday's meeting.

Diversion Authority members Darrell Vanyo and Rodger Olson and Cass County Administrator Keith Berndt answered questions from rural residents, school and township officials and business owners.

At the heart of the debate were concerns about the personal impacts the project will have on residents' homes and livelihoods south of Fargo-Moorhead.

Upstream communities such as Christine, Hickson and Oxbow lie in an area that has been designated to hold back water south of the diversion during times of high flood.

The impact will uproot numerous residents and businesses, and residents questioned repeatedly why they had to be the sacrificial lambs" to ensure Fargo-Moorhead received flood protection.

For instance, residents asked why the Army Corps didn't study a basinwide approach that emphasized water retention.

"Why have you not looked at an integrated plan to solve this problem so that Fargo can win and the upstream people aren't impacted?" asked Craig Hertsgaard, a Kindred resident with the "Stop the Fargo Dam" group.

The corps' feasibility study found that retention alone would not provide adequate protection for the metro area. As well, the farther away retention is located, the less effective it is in mitigating floods.

"While valuable, the problem with retention is no resident wants the water stored on their land," Berndt said.

For that reason, finding an acceptable location for the retention solution is a challenge, he said.

The gathering grew increasingly heated over the course of the evening, as Diversion Authority officials answered residents' questions as best they could but the responses weren't received well.

Distrust with both Diversion Authority officials and the Army Corps of Engineers resonated in residents' comments.

Fargo City Engineer Mark Bittner calmed the mood by acknowledging a meeting between diversion officials and affected residents came way too late. "One of the areas we failed at miserably was getting out to the public," Bittner said. "We owe you something."

Diversion officials pledged to reach out further to residents affected by the project, specifically those in Richland and Wilkin counties who asked again Monday for a seat at the decision table.

"These things will continue to be analyzed, continue to be looked at," said Vanyo, co-chairman of the Diversion Authority. "This project isn't just forging ahead."

Readers can reach Forum reporter Kristen Daum at (701) 241-5541