



The Forum of Fargo-Moorhead

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Red River diversion foes launch ad campaign

FARGO — A group of mostly rural North Dakota and Minnesota residents who feel their homes are being sacrificed to save a metropolitan area from flooding is ratcheting up its campaign.

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FARGO — A group of mostly rural North Dakota and Minnesota residents who feel their homes are being sacrificed to save a metropolitan area from flooding is ratcheting up its campaign.

The MnDak Upstream Coalition, a contingent of about 250 people south of the Fargo area, outlined its plan to fight the \$2 billion Red River diversion with a four-page advertising flier inserted Wednesday in The Forum, North Dakota's largest newspaper.

"Request your local leaders and congressional representatives to work together TO SAVE EVERYONE in the Red River Valley from floodwaters," the brochure reads.

The 36-mile diversion channel would split from the main path of the Red River south of Fargo and angle west, where it would cross three larger and two smaller tributaries before re-joining the Red north of the city. The project has met opposition from several communities upstream of the north-flowing river that stand to lose houses, churches, businesses, precious farmland and school district revenue.

Fargo commissioner Brad Wimmer, a member of the Metro Flood Study Work Group, said the coalition appears to be "grasping at straws," but believes diversion supporters are up for the challenge.

"Some of the things that will come out are probably good for all of us," Wimmer said. "We're still committed to moving forward and we've got so many positive things happening."

Some residents in the Fargo and Moorhead, Minn., metropolitan area have spent three straight years embroiled in major flood fights. The cities are split by the river but together have spent millions of dollars and participated in massive sandbagging efforts to hold back waters.

Some believe the diversion is the only solution.

Upstream residents disagree and are willing to spend money to make their point. They have hired lawyers and engineers. They have lobbied local leaders. Now they're advertising.

"When you're taking away people's livelihoods, their communities and their homes, we will invest what we need to fight this thing," coalition spokesman Nathan Berseth said. "We'll use every measure we can."

Asked about a possible lawsuit, Berseth said, "I don't know how close we are. Is it being discussed? Yes."

Berseth said Fargo needs permanent flood protection and isn't necessarily opposed to the idea of a diversion. The coalition would prefer the original — and cheaper — U.S. Army Corps of Engineers plan that would have placed it in Minnesota.

The coalition's complaint lies primarily with an additional flood control measure that would store 200,000 acre feet of water about 20 miles south of Fargo and flood property in the town of Oxbow and surrounding areas. Supporters call it a staging area. Opponents call it a dam.

Berseth believes the water can be spread out in storage areas further south. Keith Berndt, the Cass County administrator, said there's not enough space for that.

"The current plan is the most efficient way to store water," Berndt said. "The farther away you go, the more you have to store."

The issue has pitted urban against rural, and in some cases, county against county. A handful of Cass County residents who have found themselves in the path of the diversion want annexation to Richland County because they believe their complaints have been ignored by commissioners. Fargo is located in Cass County.

Wimmer said it's unfortunate that homes and other structures may be lost, but said it has been studied for two years and is soon to become an official federal project. The design of the diversion is expected to be completed in a year. "It's rolling," Wimmer said.

Perry Miller, a Richland County commissioner who represents constituents opposed to the diversion, isn't so sure. He thinks the project is bigger than what is needed and more expensive than what people can afford.

"The train has probably left the station, but they're going to have to stop for fuel pretty quick," Miller said.

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