

## Area leaders expect to meet with FEMA regarding flood map changes

New maps could put some residents in flood plain in area that has never flooded

[By Carrie McDermott • Daily News carriem@wahpetondailynews.com](mailto:carriem@wahpetondailynews.com)

Jun 23, 2017 Updated Jun 27, 2017



Dennis Miranowski, Public Works director with the city of Wahpeton, describes flood protection work around the city that's in the process of being completed. The periodic inspection was just done in Wahpeton, he said, and the city is working to finish up encroachment work down at Chahinkapa Park by the zoo.

Area officials want a meeting with FEMA representatives to determine if additional hydrologic data and information can be submitted independent of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for consideration to the revision that's being done on the flood plain maps in Wilkin and Richland counties.

Local leaders from Wahpeton and Richland County, along with Breckenridge and Wilkin County, Minnesota, met with FEMA and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

representatives back in April in Breckenridge, about technical revisions to the flood maps. Revised maps were released in March, which showed changes to maps released back in September 2016. These new maps could put some area residents into the flood plain that have never flooded before, requiring them to purchase flood insurance. The changes in mapping is being done as part of the levy certification process for Breckenridge and Wahpeton.

City and county leaders and staff, along with representatives from Interstate Engineering, Houston Engineering Inc., and Moore Engineering Inc., met again Wednesday, June 21 at the Wilkin County Recycling Center for a public roundtable discussion. Area legislators and their representatives were also part of the approximately 40 people in attendance.

Stephanie Miranowski, chairman, Wilkin County Board of Commissioners, and Nathan Berseth, chairman, Richland County Board of Commissioners, led the meeting.

Breckenridge City Administrator Renae Marthaler updated the audience on what's going on with the city in regards to flood protection work.

"We had to adopt the flood maps in 2015 and those maps did not take into account our levy or diversion, but we had to adopt them. That put a lot of people into the flood plain who have to pay flood insurance. From our standpoint, we want our residents to be able to have the maps shown accurately and to not have to pay that flood insurance," she said. "We're at the point now where we want to certify them, however we understand that will affect Wilkin County and the surrounding region. We want to do this as a team going forward and figure out what the best approach is for that."

Wahpeton is further behind the certification process, as they are still finishing up a few projects.

Discussion revolved around inconsistencies of the base flood elevation levels up and down the Red River Valley, and that the Fargo-Moorhead flood protection project is directing the changes the Corps is making to the projects on the southern end of the valley.

Berseth said since the Wahpeton flood gauges date to 1942, the Corps is using only that data and newer for their modeling, "which also happens to correlate with Fargo-Moorhead's new 100-year flood plain. They have to mesh. You can't go to a county line and have different 100-year flood plains, therefore (with) the Fargo-Moorhead new 100-year flood plain, what they're trying to do with 1942 and beyond, they're trying to implement that into Richland and Wilkin counties."

Audience members said they would like to see a larger period of record used in the modeling, to give a better historical flooding picture for the area.

Berseth said concerns about the northern part of Richland County identified as being inside a flood plain with identified base flood elevations will mean those who live up

there will have to buy flood insurance and won't be able to build in identified areas — a similar concern for southern Wilkin County residents.

“Two, if they establish the flood plain of 1942 and beyond, that elevation will increase, therefore should the (F-M) diversion ever be constructed, we won't be compensated in the northern part of the counties because they'll say, 'You were in the 100-year flood plain, you would have flooded anyway.' It's a double-edged sword in regards to the northern part of the county,” Berseth said.

Wilkin County Environmental Officer Bruce Poppel said at the April meeting, it was revealed how the 2015 mapping did not use the most current available data at that time.

“I'm not sure whose fault that is. The question came up that day, 'why not?' and their response was, 'no one gave it to us',” Poppel said. “Why wouldn't somebody go look for it? That's some of the discussions I've had with the Corps and not necessarily with FEMA, but their consulting company – how do you make sure you have the best available information we have? I think that's one of our concerns and one of the things we need to work on through this process is to make sure they have the best available information.”

Discussion then moved on to asking whether FEMA would accept additional information submitted to them by entities or engineering firms who are not the Corps.

“Yes, that was one bit of info Tim Fox gleaned from the last meeting,” Berseth said. “He asked point blank, can the Corps be replaced by another engineering firm and the answer was yes. That seems like a pretty simple answer there.”

Poppel said he spoke with a FEMA consultant about their requirements to get additional data, and was told the sooner the better. They want it early in the process.

“I think you need to fire the Corps and feed the information straight to FEMA. It's not going to go through the Corps and come out the same way on the other end,” former Breckenridge Mayor Cliff Barth suggested.

Berseth said perhaps the additional data could be given to an outside engineering firm who may be able to collaborate the findings, then sent on to FEMA.

Mike Bassingthwaite, Interstate Engineering, said he believes what's driving the increase in the base flood elevations the Corps is presenting, “is the hydrology, the additional flow. They already have better topography data built into their RAS (River Analysis System) model, it really goes back to hydrology and period of record,” he said.

“You go back to the '78 flood insurance study, the Wahpeton gauge was put in in 1942 so they had data from 1942 and from 1971, so they had a limited window of time to use,” Erik Jones, Houston Engineering, explained. “When FEMA came back and they remapped things, the maps effective in 2015, they didn't include hydrology for the Otter Tail and Bois de Sioux rivers. They basically took that 1971 data and brought that to the

future, and didn't include any of the more recent. That's what's really driven the change in water levels here."

The Corps did a straightening project on the Otter Tail River in the 1950s, but the waterway looks quite different today than it did back then, Thomas Eskro, Houston Engineering, said.

"They're using the geometry from the 1950s in the model today, but in the last 60 years, the watershed district did a study where they collected a lot of that data of what the actual river looks like, and things have changed considerably for the river, both profile and cross section. It has gotten both deeper and wider. The river has more capacity than it did in the design of 1950."

An alternative flood protection measure, retention, was also discussed.

Eventually it was determined there are a number of data resources to tap into and the group agreed to form a committee to schedule a meeting with FEMA representatives and find out how to go about getting those resources to them. Representatives from both counties and cities will be on the committee, along with other identified staff members.