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We must protect the Green River valley from flooding

By Suzette Cooke and Joan McBride

Special to The Times

Flood protection is a dominant issue for King County and Green River valley city officials, which is appropriate given the high level of alarm due to the situation at the Howard Hanson Dam.

Improving the Green River levee system — and fixing the Howard Hanson Dam — is critical. The Green River valley is home to thousands of people, 100,000 jobs and \$30 billion in assets, making it an economic engine for the entire state.

While there is a plan to improve the levees and repair the dam, it is going to be expensive and take time, potentially decades. Preserving all that is at stake requires swift action; but we need resolution of conflicting federal mandates.

Timely levee repair and replacement is complicated by contradictory requirements between federal agencies. When federal salmon-recovery plans call for trees to be planted for habitat while the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers requires removal of these same trees to receive federal funding, we have a recipe for delayed projects and inefficient use of limited tax dollars. Federal agencies must resolve this conflict so we can protect our citizens, preserve our economy and implement locally adopted habitat-conservation efforts.

A second challenge is the high cost of acquiring land necessary to fix levees. Current regulations allow federal funding only to be spent on construction. Changing federal-funding requirements to include land acquisition will enhance our ability to proceed with these public-safety projects.

The Green River levees, built by farmers decades ago, have been a concern since the mid-1980s. The King County Council responded, enacting a special property tax to pay for levee maintenance 20 years ago.

By 2007, it became evident more financial resources were needed for flood-protection projects throughout the county. The council responded by creating a new independent agency — the King

County Flood Control District. Property taxes now generate more than \$36 million a year for flood-protection projects.

Flood protection became even more critical following a determination by the Corps that the right abutment of the Howard Hanson Dam was seeping and unable to retain water at its previous levels.

The Flood Control District Board, chaired by King County Councilmember Julia Patterson, responded by working closely with the Corps and valley city officials on a two-pronged strategy:

- Speed up already-planned levee improvements. The flood district compressed a 10-year levee plan to get the work done sooner. Nearly three miles of Green River levees — in the most vulnerable areas — have already been repaired. This year, the county is prioritizing acquisition of riverfront right-of-way to provide access so that 3.5 miles of levee repairs and improvements can be made.
- Raise the levees to provide a higher level of protection. Levees along more than 25 miles of the river were raised last year using giant sandbags and Hesco barriers.

King County, state and valley city officials have also worked closely with residents and business owners to develop extensive emergency-response plans in the unlikely event of major flooding.

Federal, county and city engineers are carefully monitoring every foot of the levees for signs of failure and are prepared to make emergency repairs.

Since 2007, approximately \$56 million has been invested to improve or repair Green River levees and to provide temporary protection related to Howard Hanson Dam.

We must keep the spotlight on all that is at risk. This requires accelerated efforts to improve and fix the Green River levees and Howard Hanson Dam.

Suzette Cooke, left, is mayor of Kent. Joan McBride is mayor of Kirkland. Both serve on the King County Flood Control District Advisory Committee; Cooke as chair and McBride as vice-chair.

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