



Wednesday, October 21, 2009

**MILTON-FREEWATER**

## Group ponders levee bond try

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The group assembled to tackle the levee problems in Milton-Freewater is dealing with a few timelines. First, the group wants to have a bond measure on the ballot this spring, and second, the Federal Emergency Management Agency says it will put its new flood maps into effect next summer.

When those maps are in effect Milton-Freewater residents may have to pay \$300 to \$600 a year in flood insurance. The most recent bond the Milton-Freewater Water Control District tried to pass in the fall of 2008 would have cost the owner of a \$100,000 home about \$33 a year.

The group assembled, called an Oregon Solutions team designated by Governor Ted Kulongoski, overseen by Sen. David Nelson and coordinated by contractor Dick Townsend, is made up of more than 20 people from agencies ranging from the Army Corps of Engineers to the environmental department at the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation to the Oregon State Lands Department.

Last April FEMA released new flood maps which, with the damage to the levee system along the Walla Walla River, show nearly the entire city under water in a 100-year flood. In August the city challenged the maps because FEMA didn't use the most accurate elevation information. This month, FEMA told Nelson the revised maps would be ready by December, making them effective next summer.

City Manager Linda Hall said she thought FEMA finishing the maps by December was an "ambitious" goal.

"We have bought ourselves some time, again we don't know for sure exactly how much time," Hall said. "It seems to me this is October 20, and unless they have them almost done I can't believe they can have them complete by December."

Hall said the city and Umatilla County have been giving FEMA more local mapping information via the Department of State Lands. She hoped the new maps FEMA is making will be more accurate.

"What those may look like is anyone's guess," Hall said, "but it would be a logical assumption to say that there will be a lot less area in the floodplain in the city of Milton-Freewater."

Meanwhile, Brian Wolcott, executive director of the Walla Walla Basin Watershed Council, said the Oregon Solutions group aims to have a bond measure on the ballot in May. This bond - unlike the three previous attempts that funded only repairs - would fund the needed structural repairs, remove trees and bushes along the levee that could compromise it and provide funds for future operations and maintenance costs.

Along those same lines, Wolcott wanted to update 2007 studies of repair needs and find common ground on the vegetation issue between Corps of Engineers requirements and wildlife requirements.

The Oregon Solutions group also want to see an aggressive media campaign to inform citizens about the problem. Hall volunteered to head a public relations sub-committee.

"Let people know what the issues are, what they will potentially be looking at with flood insurance increases as a way to work toward a May election timeline," Wolcott said.

By getting people informed, Nelson hoped to gain community support for fixing the levees.

"A lot of the funding stream is going to have to come out of the bonding process," Nelson said. "... If this thing is going to fly, the community of Milton-Freewater is going to have to get behind it."

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