

Corps may revisit flooding study -- Seeks answer to Passaic basin woes

By Andrea Alexander, Staff Writer *The Record (Bergen County, NJ)* — December 1, 2009

Could levies along the Passaic River prevent periodic floods that have caused more than \$1 billion in damage over the last 25 years?

Or perhaps a new reservoir in the Two Bridges area along the Wayne and Lincoln Park border, or building floodgates at the Beatties Dam in Little Falls, would tame floodwaters that have claimed lives, destroyed homes, closed businesses and made Route 23 impassable for days.

Since 1936, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has wrestled with how to reduce flooding in the 983-square-mile Passaic River Basin—one of the most densely developed flood plains along the Eastern Seaboard. However, no comprehensive plan has ever come to fruition since a proposal was shelved in the mid-1990s for a \$1.8 billion, 21-mile tunnel to divert floodwaters to Newark Bay.

But the corps might be getting ready to tackle the question again in response to urging by members of a task force spearheaded by state Assemblyman Scott Rumana, R-Wayne, and a request from the state Department of Environmental Protection. To consider new ideas to curtail flooding, the corps has \$400,000 and the DEP may kick in another \$100,000 or so to revisit the engineering study, now more than 20 years old, that had recommended the flood tunnel.

"This is an investment that absolutely needs to be made," Rumana said, citing the costs and the dangers, particularly to emergency workers, that come with flooding.

Corps Project Manager Alicia Gould said she hopes to get the go-ahead to reopen the flood mitigation study for the Passaic River and its tributaries by spring, when the corps would start drafting a plan and pursue a cost-sharing agreement with the DEP under which the state would pay 25 percent of the study's cost. The study would outline options and their costs.

The corps will consider recommendations included in a report produced last year by Rumana's Central Passaic River Task Force, Gould added.

Some projects have moved forward since the flood tunnel proposal was abandoned, including buyouts in Wayne's Hoffman Grove neighborhood beside the Pompton River and the \$21.6 million Pompton Lake Dam project along the Ramapo to the north. But the study will consider new engineering projects to end the cycle of flooding.

"Ultimately for all of our projects we would like to protect municipalities from flooding," Gould said. "That is ultimately what the task force is after, and it's the same thing that we are after."

Any project or series of projects that gets recommended would have to compensate for the natural characteristics of the Passaic River system. Damage from floods in the Passaic basin has been staggering over the years. The latest, in April 2007, was the worst in decades: 5,000 people evacuated and \$686 million in damage.

The basin is unique because two major rivers, the Pompton and Passaic, converge in a low-lying area that naturally does not have sufficient drainage, explained Qizhong Guo, a water resources engineer at Rutgers University. He compared the river system to a bathroom drain that is not large enough, so when there is too much water, it overflows. And, adding to the problem are the nearly 550 homes built in the floodwaters' immediate path. According to the DEP, there are 20,000 homes, businesses, and public buildings in areas that are susceptible to flooding in the Passaic River Basin.

Development that takes away land that can absorb floodwaters makes the problem worse, but Guo said it's not the major factor. Historical data back him up: The worst flood to hit the area in 100 years occurred in 1903, when North Jersey was a lot less developed. The Passaic River crested at 17.5 feet, about 5.5 feet higher than during the 2007 flood.

Any flood mitigation project would not be able to stop the type of flood seen once in a 100 years, but Rumana said something is needed that would "take the teeth out the tiger and minimize that severe impact."

Gould said that, although the corps will reevaluate the study that recommended the tunnel, "it's not to say it will be the same outcome."

"Highly unlikely," Rumana added, when asked if the task force or the corps would recommend the tunnel.

Rep. Bill Pascrell Jr., D-Paterson, who helped secure federal funding to reopen the study, was adamant that the tunnel project would not be revised as a result.

"The tunnel as far as I am concerned is dead," Pascrell said. "Right now the Army corps is not looking at that 25-year-old solution as a remedy, because the money is not there. We are looking for other possibilities."

Fast facts

- The Whippany, Rockaway, Pequannock, Wanaque, Ramapo and Pompton rivers drain from the Highlands and are major tributaries of the Passaic River. Flooding occurs primarily in Wayne, Lincoln Park, Pequannock, Pompton Lakes and Fairfield in the central basin.
- The Lower Valley extends from Little Falls to Newark Bay. It is the most extensively developed area of the watershed and includes Paterson, Passaic and Newark. (*Source: Passaic River Coalition*)

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By ANDREA ALEXANDER, STAFF WRITER

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