

Stronger flood levees for Marysville

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In 1857, the city of Marysville was one of California's most prosperous cities. The Gold Rush was in full swing and Marysville, located on the banks of the Yuba River, was right in the center of it all. Riverboats steamed from San Francisco to the city bearing miners and everything they needed to strike a fortune. By the time the gold rush ended, more gold had been mined out of the Yuba River watershed than anywhere else in California. But it would come at a cost to the people of Marysville.

In their relentless pursuit of gold, mining companies had unearthed entire hillsides, washing hundreds of millions of cubic yards of dirt and rock downstream into the Yuba River. This debris raised the riverbed and elevated the city's flood risk. In response, a 7.6 mile-long levee was built around the city to protect its citizens from the rapidly rising river. In some places, this ring levee is over 30 feet high. For decades, it worked well. Photographs from 1955, 1986 and 1997 show the entire city surrounded by floodwaters. But over time, design weaknesses, stronger floods, and new levee standards prompted local and state officials to work with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) on a more sustainable solution.

Soon, the city of Marysville will realize a major milestone when the Corps begins large-scale repairs to the Marysville Ring Levee. For all of us who live in the Yuba/Sutter region, the roar of heavy machinery will be a welcome sound because Marysville will be on its way to a dramatic reduction in our risk of flooding. The new Marysville ring levee will be designed to withstand a potential flood that has up to approximately 1 in a 250 chance of occurring any given year. When the project is complete, the city will be one of only a few in California's Central Valley with this level of protection. That said, it's important to remember that anytime you live behind a levee, you are at risk, and should plan and prepare accordingly.

These long-awaited fortifications are a positive step for this community, and begin to fulfill a federal commitment made in the aftermath of the tragic 1986 flood. Unlike many other levees in the U.S., this ring levee completely encircles the city, reducing our risk of flooding from the Yuba and Feather rivers. The watersheds of these two rivers experience the highest rainfall averages in the Sierra Nevada Range, being east of San Francisco Bay and unshielded by coastal mountains. According to the Corps, because of the city's topography and its location between these rivers, floodwaters that breached the ring levee would result in a deep, swift and cold flood event.

A flood in Marysville could cause tragic social, economic and environmental consequences to our city, its 12,000 residents and the broader region. All Yuba County services would be

impacted because the city is home to the county's government offices. Rescue efforts might be delayed because two major state highways which run straight through the city's center could become inundated (Highways 20 and 70). Flooding may also threaten Rideout Memorial Hospital, limiting emergency services to the only level-3 trauma center in the region. Of course, flooding can also take a heavy toll on businesses and economic activity.

To reduce our risk, this multi-year construction effort will be the most thorough to ever occur on the ring levee. Based on extensive design and engineering studies, and more robust construction standards, the improved levee sections will meet the highest construction standards. In the first construction phase of this multi-phase project, Corps contractors will install a new "cutoff" wall to fortify the levee. It will be nearly one-mile long, or roughly 492,000 square feet, and over 100 feet deep in some places.

The collaboration behind this project is impressive. We applaud the leadership of the Corps, the California Department of Water Resources (DWR), the Central Valley Flood Protection Board (CVFPB), the city of Marysville, the Marysville Levee Commission, and the Yuba County Water Agency. These agencies are working side by side to ensure the work is high-quality and completed on time. California's congressional delegation also deserves acknowledgement. Congressman Wally Herger and Sen. Dianne Feinstein have worked well together to ensure the Corps leadership in Washington, D.C., recognizes the importance of this initiative. They've also been successful in obtaining federal funding for the project. Sen. Barbara Boxer also worked to secure a needed project reauthorization in 2007.

The start of construction on the Marysville Ring Levee is a significant accomplishment, and one we should celebrate. Soon, the city of Marysville will begin to realize its full potential on a more solid and sustainable footing. On behalf of the people of Marysville and Yuba County, I want to extend a heartfelt thank you to everyone who has helped us get this project into construction.

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