

Federal Army big-wig sees J Levee in person, project ready for repair

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HAMILTON CITY >> Two months ago, community leaders in Hamilton City received news the J Levee that protects the town from the Sacramento River was on the federal list for repairs.

They've been hoping for a fix to their flood worries for three decades.

Yet, somehow the news good news was solidified by a visit last week by one of the U.S. Army's top brass.

Assistant Secretary of the Army (Civil Works) Jo-Ellen Darcy met with Glenn County dignitaries and people from the community who have lobbied feverishly to save their town from flood.

Darcy was the Army official who testified on behalf of the J Levee improvements before the Senate, explained Lee Ann Grigsby-Puente, president of Hamilton City's Reclamation District 2140.

"This was definitely an exciting event," Grigsby-Puente said. Darcy was able to see the area where the levee has weakened over the decades.

"We were able to show her 'this is the first house that floods if (the levee) breaks'."

"'This is the new housing development and the high school'," that would be damaged "'if we get hit'."

For years members of the town have said there is no longer any use in fighting the Sacramento River if waters surge, because sandbags will no longer do the job.

The J Levee was built in 1905, with 1905 engineering standards. Repairs were made after two floods in the 1970s and during six other emergencies in the past 30 years.

With a plan, and now funding on the way, each step of the process is exciting, especially since people have worked so hard to get this far.



An aerial photo of the J Levee along the Sacramento River near Hamilton City showing Doug Ehrk's riverfront house. Ehrk said a family member shot this photo recently. (Contributed by Doug Ehrk)

Grigsby-Puente said her group of levee advocates is still vigilant, knowing that "a timeline has a different definition to a layperson than to the government."

She said her group still makes phone calls each weekday, week-after-week.

"They are not going to forget Hamilton City," Grigsby-Puente said. "They are probably sick of us."

The plan is to finalize the contracts this year. The first phase of the project will take a few years after that. More funding will still be needed to finish the costly repairs. However, once a federal project is partially funded, more federal money is easier to secure.

The visit Tuesday included a gathering of those most involved.

"She was able to meet (Sheriff) Larry Jones and (Community Services Director) Jose Puente who have been working on this project for 30 years.

"When the sheriff started his career, one of this first years there was a flood fight. Now he is retiring. It's been 30 years," Grigsby-Puente said.

Officials, including Supervisor Leigh McDaniel, gave Darcy a riverside history of the battle with the river and dealing with floods.

Congressmen Doug LaMalfa and John Garamendi were also instrumental in helping the funding work its way through congressional committees and the men saw the project through to final votes in the House and Senate.

Garamendi was also at the meeting with Darcy Tuesday.

"I feel very privileged she chose to come see it," he said. "It wasn't like we said you need to come. She wanted to come see it."

Darcy has known the project for the past four years, Grigsby-Puente said. When it is completed, her visit this week will help the Army assistant secretary understand the value of the completed project.

The full project is estimated at \$52.4 million. In March \$8.6 million was set aside in the federal budget. This funding came after many delays, including years when Congress was not approving any new projects during the nation's fiscal crisis.

The Reclamation District, the group's lobbyist, local state and federal officials and anyone with influence in town has been lobbying to land federal funding. A state and local share of costs was worked out over the past dozen-plus years.

See the story in March that talks more about the long effort: <http://goo.gl/I5Mm7v>

In some ways, the drought has been a blessing for the town, as at least the waters of the Sacramento River have temporarily not been a threat. However, Grigsby-Puente has read preliminary predictions

that this winter could see El Niño weather patterns. One more flood would be a disaster when the project has come this close to reality, she said.

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