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Flood District Committee approves Kent levee repair plan; controversy erupts among City Council

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Mike Mactutis, city of Kent environmental engineering manager, looks at the Briscoe Levee along the Green River.

The controversial dispute between the city of Kent and King County about the best plan to spend millions of dollars to repair a Green River levee to improve flood protection and reduce insurance rates took a step in Kent's favor.

The [King County Flood District](#) Executive Committee voted 3-1 on Thursday in Seattle to recommend to the full nine-member flood district board to choose the estimated \$17 million Kent proposal to build a flood wall along the 2.5-mile Briscoe-Desimone levee. The county has proposed setback levee options

estimated at costs of more than \$63 million and up to \$416 million because of the need buy property and move businesses to expand the levee.

"This at least gets us closer to resolution," said Kent Mayor Suzette Cooke, who attended the meeting. "This is not the final say. We still have the full board to convince in a positive way that Kent's approach is the most practical. It's as safe as the county's and more cost effective."

The full flood district board is expected to vote on the recommendation in the next 10 days or so once a special meeting date is determined.

But even the Kent City Council can't agree if its city staff has the best proposal.

Larry Gossett, a member of the flood district executive committee, said he voted against the Kent proposal party because of testimony earlier at the meeting by City Councilwoman Elizabeth Albertson that the council hadn't signed off on the city staff plan.

"This motion asks us to approve Kent's vision and we heard today (Thursday) that the City Council of Kent hasn't even taken a formal position, so is this really Kent's vision?" Gossett said, "I'd like to look into that a little more."

Gossett will soon get to find out exactly how the City Council stands.

In response to Gossett's comment, Council President Dennis Higgins on Friday called for a Special Meeting of the council at 7 p.m. Monday at City Hall to vote on a resolution to endorse the city staff proposal to fix the levee.

Higgins said he expects to get the four votes to approve the resolution among the seven members but doesn't expect it to be unanimous. That's because at last Tuesday's Council meeting to approve a consulting contract to work on the Briscoe levee, the council split 3-3 (Councilman Les Thomas was ill and missed the meeting). Cooke has the power to break ties and she voted to approve the contract for more design work if the full flood district board approved Kent's plan.

Higgins, Dana Ralph and Bill Boyce voted for the levee consultant contract. Albertson, Jamie Perry and Deborah Ranniger voted against it, as they preferred to delay the decision. Thomas said in a phone interview Friday that he would have voted for the consultant contract and plans to vote for the resolution on Monday.

At the flood district meeting, Albertson testified that she spoke for the other half of the council after Cooke and Ralph spoke in favor of the Kent levee proposal.

"Our own City Council has not voted on this flood wall proposal," Albertson said. "We're in a precarious position. We need more information to move forward. I'd like to recommend that this go back to the (flood district) advisory committee."

Albertson said that Perry sent a letter to the flood district board to ask it to delay a decision on picking the city or county levee repair plan.

"It adds confusion when one has a council member speak in opposition to the majority vote," Cooke said after the meeting about Gossett's vote against the Kent proposal.

County Executive Dow Constantine also sent a letter to the flood district board to ask for the decision to be delayed in order to look at the bigger picture of a repair plan for the entire Green River levee system.

"I urge the district to either move ahead with the levee setback (county plan) at Briscoe Business Park or allocate the available funds to high-priority capital projects for which there is already general agreement on the approach," Constantine said in the letter.

Cooke testified that works needs to be done as soon as possible to repair the levee and that the project needs to be approved in order to get the \$7 million state grant awarded by the Legislature last year.

"The Kent plan puts immediate safety in place," Cooke said. "That does not preclude to go back later for setback levees. Our studies show it would cost \$1 million to remove the walls. But with limited resources, we don't have decades to wait."

The four-member flood district committee [heard a report last month from a third-party consultant](#) (hired for \$25,000 by the flood district) to help resolve the dispute between Kent and the county about the levee that runs from South 200th Street to South 180th Street.

Metropolitan King County Council members Julia Patterson, Reagan Dunn, Kathy Lambert and Gossett serve on the flood district executive committee. The full county council composes the full flood district board.

"I'm always concerned until the vote is taken, you can't be certain," Cooke said about whether the full board would approve Kent's plan. "It was very encouraging with Patterson's comments. She was very eloquent in making specific points as to why she was voting in support of the Kent approach. I think that will help with some of her peers on the flood control board."

The [dispute between Kent and the county](#) started about a year ago.

"I truly did not know what to do with this," said Patterson at the meeting. "We had very different proposals on how to address this stretch of the Green River and there was no compromise and we tried to find that."

Patterson then praised the work of consultant Robert Gilbert, a University of Texas professor of civil, architectural, and environmental engineering, who analyzed both proposals and favored the Kent plan to protect businesses in Kent, Tukwila and Renton, including the Boeing Space Center, the Starbucks Roasting Plant, IKEA and the Alaska Airlines Call Center. Gilbert provided more testimony on Thursday.

The project is part of a larger effort by Kent to have the entire levee system within city limits accredited by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in order to remove properties behind the levee from FEMA flood maps to reduce development restrictions as well as flood insurance costs and requirements in the Kent Valley.

"We just don't know when FEMA is going to lay those maps down on the table and it's causing extraordinary anxiety in the valley because we don't know what they're going to do," Patterson said. "The certainty of us taking a vote is extremely important for business in the valley. It's extremely important for the economy in King County as a whole that there be some certainty provided. The last thing we want to do is delay this anymore."

The large cost difference between the two plans also caused Patterson to side with Kent.

"The flood district can construct the levee setback with a flood wall for \$17 million and we already have \$7 million from the state for that," she said. "On the other hand, even the short-term setback being proposed by the county would cost \$71 million. That's almost double what money the flood district raises every year to protect the entire county from flooding just to put it in perspective."

The flood district is funded by a property tax assessment of 10 cents per \$1,000 assessed valuation to fund projects. That tax brings in about \$35 million per year to help pay for projects along six rivers in the county.

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