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King County approves \$17.5M plan to repair levee that protects Kent-area businesses

Published February 27th, 2:00 p.m.

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The King County Flood Control District Board of Supervisors on Tuesday OK'd a plan to fix a Green River levee that shields the Boeing Space Center and other Kent-area businesses from flooding.

The vote to spend \$17.5 million to fix the levee ends [months of squabbling, at least temporarily](#). (Subscription required.) Some county officials who oppose the approved fix — and preferred a more expensive one — worry that environmental groups could sue to block it because it doesn't do enough to protect fish habitat.

The Briscoe-Desimone Levee between South 180th and 200th streets in Kent has weak spots that don't meet federal standards. But the stakes are higher than whether or not to fix the weak spots.

In addition to Boeing, the levee protects the Starbucks roasting plant, IKEA, the Alaska Airlines call center and other businesses where more than 18,000 people work. The levee also protects highways, railroad lines, electrical transmission lines and a gasoline pipeline.

Kent officials and business owners worry that if the levee isn't repaired soon, federal officials could expand the flood plain map in much of the Green River Valley from Auburn to Tukwila. This would mean property owners in the West Coast's second largest warehouse district would have to buy flood insurance. Property owners, such as the IDS Real Estate Group that is moving ahead on [a 70-acre industrial park](#) in Kent, also would face stricter development regulations.

King County staff members had proposed a fix that early estimates showed could cost \$74 million. That was more than four times the cost of the plan the King County Flood Control District Board of Supervisors approved. The more expensive plan also would have taken longer than the approved plan to implement.

But King County Deputy Executive [Fred Jarrett](#) contends that the pricier plan would be a more comprehensive fix that a broader group, including environmentalists, would support. The King County Executive's Office worries that groups might sue to halt the approved plan because they don't believe it provides as much protection for fish habitat.

[King County Council](#) members, who make up the flood control board, disagreed with the Executive's Office and approved the cheaper plan.

County Councilmember [Julia Patterson](#) of SeaTac chairs the flood board. She said the 8-0 vote paves the way for a cost-effective, environmentally beneficial fix. It also will lead to levee accreditation by the [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#), which will mean lower insurance premiums for residents and businesses, she said.

The \$17.5 million project will be funded by a \$7 million state grant with the rest coming from flood district revenues. The district raises \$36 million from a property tax that all county property owners pay.

The flood board also voted to write a comprehensive plan for managing flood risk in the valley between the Howard Hanson Dam east of Auburn and Elliott Bay. The dam and levee system protects \$12 billion worth of property where 24,000 people live and where 100,000 people work.

Marc Stiles covers commercial real estate and government for the Puget Sound Business Journal.

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