



With levees deemed safe, Dallas mayor eager to proceed on Trinity amenities

By STEVE THOMPSON

Staff Writer

sthompson@dallasnews.com

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Dallas City Council members heralded word from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on Monday that the Trinity River levees are in much better shape than the agency warned just a few years ago.

"This is a good news day for the city of Dallas, the people of Dallas," said Vonciel Hill, chairwoman of the council's Trinity River Corridor Project committee.

Corps officials told the committee that the levees are strong enough to endure a 1,000-year to 5,000-year flood. That means there's a 1-in-1,000 to 1-in-5,000 chance of a flood happening in any given year.

It was a major reversal from three years ago, when corps officials rated the levees unacceptable to withstand an 800-year flood and said they could no longer vouch for their ability to protect the city from a 100-year flood.

Mayor Mike Rawlings thanked corps officials for becoming what they have recently referred to as a "learning organization."

"Nobody can really grow in this complicated world if they're not constantly reassessing and double-checking all the data and looking at new information as it comes in," Rawlings said. "But what I am taking from this is that, plus or minus 4,000 years, we're safe."

Rawlings said that safety is the city's first priority, but that the corps' pronouncement is also important because the city has plans for the Trinity corridor.

"We've got to get some lakes built down there, we've got to get trails built, and we've got plans for a highway as well," he said.

Quoting legendary college basketball coach John Wooden, Rawlings said it's important now to "be quick, but don't hurry."

Unanswered questions

The briefing left many unanswered questions about how much money the city might still need to spend on the levees, but corps officials said it could be significantly less than previously supposed.

The city has put tens of millions toward testing the levees and preparing to construct cutoff walls this summer to prevent water from seeping through sand beneath them.

In response to questioning from council member Scott Griggs, corps officials said there is less than a one-in-100,000 chance during any given year of such seepage actually causing levee failure — even without the cutoff walls. They added, however, that the consequences of such seepage could be catastrophic.

"I'm just trying to understand how we got from a 100-year to a 1,000 to 5,000 — what exactly has changed with the levees?" Griggs asked.

The answer from corps officials was not simple. They pointed to 198 maintenance deficiencies that the city has corrected since the corps flunked the levees three years ago.

"As well, we also understand a lot more about the levees," said the corps' Fort Worth-based commander, Col. Richard Muraski.

The answer rests mostly in a different risk assessment process for levees newly put in use by the corps. Dallas' levees are the first to undergo the new assessment, which the corps plans to begin using nationwide.

The new process

In recent years, local engineers for the corps have led the analysis of Dallas' levee problems. Under the new process, which was ordered by national corps officials, a team of corps experts based outside the state took a look at things.

The new team factored the probability of various disasters together with cost, departing from what had previously appeared to be a money-is-no-object, accept-zero-risk approach.

Unspoken during Monday's briefing was the feeling among many associated with the project that the corps drastically shifted course after Hurricane Katrina and is now readjusting. There has been pushback across the nation from local entities that would bear the costs of drastic improvements to their levees.

After Katrina, Dallas' levees were among the first to be measured by more rigorous inspection criteria. Acting on a harsh 2009 assessment, Dallas raced to restore the levees to 100-year protection before the Federal Emergency Management Agency completed redrawing downtown Dallas flood maps, potentially putting billions of dollars' worth of property into a flood plain.

The 2009 assessment also spurred plans for more extensive, longer-term repairs to bring the levees up to 800-year protection. These plans included raising the levees' height and widening them from peak to base.

It's unclear now what major improvements are left to be done, although the corps now says the levees are plenty high. The focus, officials say, should be to work on making the levees "tougher, not taller," widening their bases in some stretches and perhaps taking such measures as capping them with concrete.

AT A GLANCE: What the corps learned

Corps officials say Dallas' levees were brought up to speed, in part, by the city's efforts to correct 198 maintenance deficiencies identified previously. Their presentation also included a slide that helps explain how their risk assessment of the levees has evolved since 2007. The slide, titled "Risk Assessment — What We Learned," lists:

"Our understanding of the types of floods that generally occur in the basin."

"The impact that the shorter-duration floods have on the distance that water penetrates the levees."

"A better understanding of the combination of events that need to happen to cause failure."

"Assumed that all current and future efforts in and around the floodway system will do no harm and meet corps requirements."

SOURCE: Dallas City Hall