

The Portland Tribune

City hopes conference will help find a fix for Columbia levee

By Steve Law

August 23, 2016

A week after floodwaters battered Baton Rouge, Louisiana, the nation's leading flood-control experts converge on Portland this week for a four-day convention.

Local leaders of the Levee Ready Columbia project, who lobbied to bring the national conference here, will use the spotlight to pitch for federal funds to upgrade the 45 miles of levees that shield Portland, Troutdale, Gresham, Fairview and Sauvie Island from potentially catastrophic Columbia River floods.

The Columbia River levee system protects \$5.3 billion worth of property from flooding, including thousands of homes, the Portland International Airport, the city's backup water supply, and workplaces that host 10 percent of all jobs within Multnomah County.

The Columbia River surged to "100-year-flood" levels here — originally thought to occur only once per century — in 1894, 1948, 1956, 1964 and 1996. The most devastating was the Vanport Flood of 1948, when floodwaters burst through a railroad embankment doing double duty as a levee and leveled an entire city of 18,500 residents, many of them African-American.

The local levee system has held back raging Columbia River waters since then. But a 2014 engineering assessment by Levee Ready Columbia found that same 1.5-mile railroad embankment was still unsafe under new standards. That review found an old railroad trestle was buried inside the embankment, and there's a large cherry tree growing out one side. That segment of the levee system likely needs to be replaced.

A host of government agencies and other groups formed Levee Ready Columbia in 2013 to help meet daunting new federal flood-protection requirements enacted after Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans in 2005.

Multnomah County Commissioner Jules Bailey and other local leaders will address the National Association of Flood and Stormwater Management Agencies convention, which convenes today through Thursday at the downtown Portland Hilton Hotel. Bailey and others hope Levee Ready Columbia gets picked as a New Starts project, which is essential to getting federal money to bolster the local levee system that stretches from Troutdale to Sauvie Island.

"It's an opportunity to pitch it to the federal decision-makers," said Henry Burton, Bailey's policy director.

The Portland area is well ahead of many communities in wrestling with stiffer and still-evolving new requirements imposed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Bailey said during a boat tour of the levees last Thursday. The two federal agencies have forged a close relationship with local leaders, and see the collaboration here as a national model, he said.

"Every local government has bought in and has financial skin in the game," said Bailey, the chairman and convenor of Levee Ready Columbia.

But the federal government must choose from among cities like Portland, which are being more proactive, and other communities that have done little and may face more immediate flood risks.

Levee Ready Columbia completed engineering assessments last year on the two levee districts shielding North Portland and inner Northeast Portland. Project leaders agreed last summer to add three more levee districts that extend from Portland International Airport to Troutdale, and encircle Sauvie Island.

Once that second round of engineering assessments is done next year, Levee Ready Columbia will start talking about what physical improvements are needed, said Reed Wagner, executive director of Multnomah County Drainage District. Then the project must figure out how to pay for the projects and who must pay, he said.

Despite significant challenges ahead, there has been forward movement. Over the years, many things have been built atop the levee, including Northeast Marine Drive. In 2013, Wagner and others feared several hundred condos, homes and businesses, many of them along Marine Drive, would be deemed “encroachments” on the levee under new federal standards, and would need to be buttressed or removed.

But an engineering survey completed in May found that none of those buildings will compromise the levee’s safety, though they might get deluged during a flood, said Joel Shoening, community outreach specialist for the Multnomah County Drainage District.

Informally, the Army Corps of Engineers staff concurred that none of those buildings will have to be removed, he said.

But more than 4,000 trees and hundreds of BPA and other utility poles, traffic signals and other potential encroachments still must be evaluated.

It only takes one tree, such as that offending cherry tree, to provide an avenue for water to seep down into roots and weaken a levee.

In one recently completed project, cameras were installed inside 30 pipes that jut into the east-west levee section, “You don’t typically put multiple outfalls through a levee,” said Sara Morrissey, Levee Ready Columbia program manager. But those were installed decades ago, and some have since been abandoned, she said.

The entire project is made more complex by evolving and sometimes conflicting guidance from federal agencies. There aren’t that many “bright line standards” with the federal agencies, Bailey said. “We don’t always get the same answer, depending on who we’re talking to.”

And the unexpected pace of climate change has caused some rethinking of what weather-pattern changes mean for future flood potential. “Is a 100-year-old flood really a 100-year flood anymore?” Bailey wonders.

Last year, Burton said, Levee Ready Columbia made it through four of the five rungs needed to qualify for the New Start program, and he hopes this year Portland will climb the final rung.

Meanwhile, Morrissey said, “We’re not sitting back and waiting for a federal handout.”

Willamette Week

Report: Airbnb's Bottom Line Depends on Breaking City Rules

By Rachel Monahan

August 24, 2016

Short-term rental marketplace Airbnb has an incentive to break the rules set by Portland—and cities around the country—a new analysis finds.

Portland as well as San Francisco require that the people live in any Airbnb property at least nine months out of the year, in order to prevent tourists from taking over homes that could otherwise house local residents.

But according to the data website FiveThirtyEight, 40 percent of the revenue Airbnb hosts earn in Portland are from entire apartments or homes rented for more than 180 days a year, such as a Boise townhouse and a San Francisco condo listed by an Airbnb manager.

And Portland is not alone. These commercial properties account for 32.7 percent of the revenue from Airbnb's top-25 markets.

They represent 15.6 percent of the listings in Portland, which ranks second, after Honolulu among the 25 cities, for having the highest percentage of properties that are commercial operations.

WW reported this morning that if illegal short-term rentals were removed from the Airbnb website, as many as 1,718 homes could be made available to Portland residents instead of tourists.

Airbnb spokeswoman Alison Schumer told WW that the tech company, which has a call center in downtown Portland, is trying to get its clients to comply with city rules.

"As our host community has grown over the past two years, we have taken multiple steps to encourage hosts to get city-required permits," Schumer says. "We have hired additional staff and held 29 registration events, including five Q&A sessions with city staff."

Still, these listings, at least to date, represent a small if growing portion of the city's overall housing stock.

Airbnb took issue with the analysis. Here's how FiveThirtyEight summarized the company's objections:

Company spokesman Christopher Nulty said some of the units FiveThirtyEight identified as "commercial" might instead be boutique hotels or guest houses. He also called the 180-days-booked standard "arbitrary," and said an approach based on days-booked could never accurately identify units that would otherwise be long-term rentals.

The Portland Mercury

BREAKING: Mayor Charlie Hales Wants to Extend Portland's Housing State of Emergency By Three Years

By Dirk VanderHart

August 25, 2016

Mayor Charlie Hales is preparing to push his council colleagues to take a step stronger than anything envisioned when City Council enacted a housing "state of emergency" last year.

As the initial period of that emergency is set to run dry on October 7, Hales wants council to extend it for a whopping three more years. Rumblings about the proposal have been moving through City Hall in recent days, and were confirmed by an agenda item posted to the City Auditor's website today:

The state of emergency designation has been crucial to the city's approach to stemming a rising homelessness problem in the last year. Time and again, it's allowed officials to site temporary homeless shelters on plots of land where zoning would otherwise make that difficult. And it's at the heart of a proposal to create a large, controversial temporary shelter at a city-owned plot in Northwest Portland, Terminal 1. That project's reliance on the emergency could split support for extending it, though other factors will certainly come into play.

It's not entirely clear how Hales' office can extend the state of emergency by such a dramatic duration. When council declared the emergency last year, it tweaked city code [PDF] to say: "The initial duration of a housing emergency shall not exceed one year, but may be extended in six-month increments."

Now the mayor, whose time in City Hall is up on December 31, apparently wants to string together six of those six-month increments into a single ordinance. That's caused some confusion in City Hall about the proposal, but there's also support. Brendan Finn, chief of staff to Housing Commissioner Dan Saltzman, told the Mercury yesterday Saltzman will vote yes for an extension.

"There does need to be an extension, which my boss supports, and I believe we'll be needing to be doing that rather soon," Finn said.

We've been reaching out to Hales' office about the housing emergency all morning, but have yet to hear back about specifics. We'll update when we do.

We've also reached out to Mayor-elect Ted Wheeler, since he'd be in office for the vast majority of the three-year extension.

Update, 11:36 am: Here's the ordinance [PDF] council will vote on next week. Turns out Hales wants to get around the six-month limit on extensions by simply doing away with it. The ordinance reads: "The provisions of PCC 15.04.040.B limiting the duration of the extension of a housing emergency are waived, and the housing emergency declared by Ordinance 187371 is hereby extended for three years, through October 6, 2019."

The ordinance also lays out some of the new efforts that have been made possible by the looser standards the city has to operated under during an emergency. Those include "siting of

mobile day storage facilities that include portable toilets and sharps containers" and piloting new shelters.

It says a key reason for the three-year extension is the real-estate market.

"Given the anticipated continued pressure on the rental housing market, and associated challenges for low-income households to find and maintain housing, there remains an urgent need to continue shelter expansion and to transition temporary shelter capacity to permanent shelter capacity over the next three years," the ordinance says. The city's created numerous short-term shelter spaces, including one at an old Army Reserve building and in a vacant building downtown. Both of those have since been shuttered, but there's a new 200-bed facility at the old Multnomah County Sheriff's Office headquarters in East Portland.

As we've reported, the city and county have looked at dozens of properties as potential shelter sites in the last year, without much luck.