

Congress cuts ties to Corps of Engineers, leaving state, districts high and dry

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5/8/15
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The U.S. Congress left not only Tillamook County, but the state of Oregon high and dry financially when they recently cut off funding support for dikes, levees and other water management devices.

It also put homeowners and property owners in limbo over mortgages if the property was located in affected areas.

"An amendment at the congressional level has abandoned the partnership between the Corps of Engineers and the owners of dikes and levees," according to State Sen. Betsy Johnson (D, Scappoose).

Johnson was part of a panel discussion with three other state representatives Thursday in the Rawe Conference Room in the Tillamook PUD building.

Much of Tillamook County is behind some kind of water management device, and actions by the Congress have left the state of Oregon on its own when it comes to funding

and inspections, Johnson said.

In response, the state senate passed an emergency bill, which became effective July 6.

It was designed to permit the Oregon Infrastructure Finance Authority to provide financial assistance for levee projects that contribute to improvement, expansion or repair of infrastructure systems and are essential for use or development of farm, industrial or commercial land. It also allows the Water Resources Department to inspect, evaluate and assess condition of levee with owner's permission and certify levee for accreditation.

The bill passed the House with a 59-0 vote and one abstention, and the Senate with a 30-0 vote.

"It will become a continuing obligation of the state. The consequences of not being behind a federally-certified levee is that you can not qualify for federal flood insurance, which means that you do

not get a mortgage," the state senator said.

As an example, Johnson had to go no further than her husband's business in Scappoose. "My husband's business is behind a dike in Scappoose. In the past, the drainage district would come to the Corps and would enter into a partnership to assay the condition of the dike. It cost about \$50,000. They (the Corps) would go out and recertify what the dikes can endure. In some cases, these are dikes that the Corps actually built."

The opportunity for partnering with the Corps of Engineers has disappeared. "The Corps is not allowed to compete with private engineers. So now, they (districts and cities) have to go out and hire an engineering firm. They look at the dikes and they don't have the same relationship that some of the good old boys that actually built the dikes.

"They come out and say 'You want us to come out and put our professional engineering stamp on

what?'

"So the certification now has a much shorter timeline for the Scappoose Drainage District and instead of costing \$50,000 it was going to cost \$2 million," Johnson said. "They (the district) went to the city and said there was no money and it was now behind uncertified dikes.

"So, you can't sell your home. People's largest asset is artificially devalued by the inability to certify these dikes and levees," she said.

According to Johnson, Senate Bill 306 provided money for local governmental agencies and districts to get grants to assay the dikes, levees and other water management devices.

"Hurricane Sandy and Hurricane Katrina completely changed the rules and if you think about Tillamook County and how much of the county is behind some kind of water management device," she said.

"That left the state totally on its own. It will be a continual obligation of the state," Johnson said during a meeting with other Democratic state representatives.

If the levees cannot be certified, then they can not qualify for federal insurance. "That means you don't get a mortgage," she explained.

"The final bill appropriated \$7 million as a starting point."

Johnson recommended that city and other district officials contact the Oregon Business Development

Department soon. "They are starting to hand out \$50,000 planning grants to say what is the condition of your dikes and levees. Then they would be eligible for low or no-interest loans.

"It is a new program but its not going to have some bumps along the way. In my view, it is a very important economic development bill simply because it will allow folks to comply with the new FEMA regulations and hopefully preserve the value of the assets they have behind the dikes," she said.

