



Wheatland residents voting on levee assessment

By [Ben van der Meer/Appeal-Democrat](#)

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About 340 property owners in Wheatland will start receiving mail ballots this week over whether to approve a maintenance fee for improved levees along the Bear River.

The maintenance assessment, which is based on the level of protection specific properties receive from the levees, as well as land use and other factors, will be about \$100 annually for a single-family home and won't be fully phased in for five years.

"Every parcel is assessed individually," said Seth Wurzel, who worked with the firm that helped plan the election with Reclamation District 2103, which manages levees around Wheatland.

That's in contrast to a similar and successful mail-ballot election a year ago under Three Rivers Levee Improvement Authority, where property owners will pay according to zones of determined levee benefit, Wurzel said.

In this election, where ballots are due back by July 15, property owners within RD 2103 are up against an August deadline for the Federal Emergency Management Agency to remap Yuba County for flood risk.

If FEMA finds the district lacks significant flood protection — a possibility, Wurzel and RD 2103 board member Darryl Stineman said, if property owners reject the assessment — it could lead to both significant rate hikes for flood insurance and moratoriums on new construction in the district.

"It places some very draconian restrictions on landowners," Stineman said, while acknowledging the district is asking property owners to open their wallets during tough economic times. "This is the last piece of the puzzle that has to be put in place."

Crews have completed work on five miles of north bank levees of the Bear River, including slurry walls and repairs on two erosion sites, said Tom Engler, project manager for MBK Engineering in Sacramento.

The level of work done, Engler said, brings the levees up to standards laid out by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1957.

"By doing that, Bear River has at or slightly above 200-year protection," Engler said.

More than half of the \$20 million to upgrade those levees came from the state, Engler said, with the rest coming from the city of Wheatland and impact fees on as-yet-undeveloped areas.

While the assessment can be adjusted annually for inflation, Stineman said, the amount for individual property owners could end up being lower in future years if parts of the district are developed with more homes.

In order to pass, the assessment must get a positive vote from a majority of returned ballots, with votes weighted by how much benefit a property owner receives.

Wurzel said if approved, the assessment will be phased in over five years, owing to the possibility FEMA will require higher flood-insurance rates in the first year, then adjust downward.

"We've taken the approach that we want to get the assessment ahead of remapping, but we're not submitting the rolls to the tax assessor's office for a year."

The assessment would be phased in 25 percent increments, up to the full amount four years later. Stineman said because the levees are new, little maintenance work should be needed in the meantime.

RD 2103 will have a hearing in Wheatland on July 15 to answer any remaining questions about the assessment, and ballots are due at the conclusion of the hearing. Results will be known by the district's July 22 special meeting, he said.

Wurzel added district officials acknowledge the improved levees also benefit residents in neighboring Reclamation District 817, but there's no mechanism for those residents to pay maintenance fees.

KNOW AND GO

WHAT: Residents in some parts of Reclamation District 2103 will soon receive mail ballots on a maintenance fee for improved Bear River levees.

WHEN: Ballots are due at the conclusion of a 6 p.m., July 15 hearing at the Wheatland Community Center, 101 C St.

MORE INFORMATION: www.wheatland.ca.gov/ RD2103 or 870-4478.

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