

Call for higher levels of flood protection - but cost debate to come

by Simon Edwards

A committee reviewing levels of flood protection for the Hutt Valley is calling for a more stringent level of defences than it earlier recommended because of feedback from the public.

But the cost has also gone up accordingly. The big debate still to come is whether Hutt folk will have to pay more as a result.

For the last two months the Hutt River Floodplain Management Advisory Committee has been asking residents, businesses and city councils for their views on the design standard for flood protection. Last week it decided to modify its earlier recommendation to the Wellington Regional Council.

The standard agreed remains a "risk-based" 2300 cumec (cubic metres of water per second, equal to a 440-year flood). Replacement bridges and structures would be built to a 2800 cumec (a "rare event" flood) standard.

However, the committee - a sub-committee of the WRC's landcare committee which includes Hutt and Upper Hutt City councillors - now recommends that stopbanks also should be built or upgraded to a height which could contain a 2800 cumec flood. This recognises the possible effect of global warming and the desirability of only upgrading stopbanks once.

More detailed studies will identify the effects on at risk properties in Belmont and Bridge Road, where edge protection is recommended for upgrading to a 2300 cumec standard.

The enhanced proposals raise the estimated cost from \$72.5 million to \$78 million. The advisory committee recommends that the works be done over a 20-25 year period, with average annual spend of about \$4 million. Again, this reflects the consultation feedback.

Advisory committee chair, Cr Stuart Macaskill, says this level of expenditure will put severe pressure on regional rates and "those who benefit directly may have to pay more".

Costs of flood works are currently covered under a 50:50 formula - half the cost is paid by ratepayers in the city/district in which the work is done, the other half across the region. So for flood work done in Hutt City, locals pay 50% as well as their share of the regional 50%.

But the Local Government Amendment Act No 3 introduces additional "rigour" and legal requirements in terms of spending for which

property owners are rated, Cr Macaskill told the *Hutt News*. Councils are required to identify who benefits from spending, or who causes a cost. In short, the general principle is 'if you benefit, you should pay the cost'. Councils have power to modify this principle based on issues to do with "fairness" and "equity" and/or if it's not possible to economically/efficiently charge more people directly.

Cr Mascakill says a "cursory" look at who benefits from flood protection in the Hutt Valley indicates Hutt residents should pay for protection - in particular those who live by the river. But it's not that simple. Damage to major infrastructure - bridges, roads, communication - could affect, the wider region, including disruption to people who commute to and from the Hutt for their employment, he says.

Kapiti also has two "wild" rivers requiring flood protection work. It is Wellington City and Porirua representatives who have in the past - "sometimes very strenuously" - argued the current 50/50 flood cost sharing can't be justified.

The debate will intensify if the Wellington Regional Council, at its 12 October meeting, accepts the flood advisory committee's design standard recommendations, meaning the whole issue will be considered as part of the WRC's Long-Term Financial Strategy.

Hutt Mayor John Terris is one who has already drawn a link between flood protection funding and bulk water levies.

His argument is along the lines: 'if Wellington City/ Porirua attempts to reduce its flood protection funding commitment, why should the Hutt Valley not review its subsidy of the rest of the region in water charges'. (It's cheaper to supply water to the Hutt because we are closer to the catchments, yet we pay the same level of water charges as other cities).

Cr Macaskill said "horse trading" on issues of regional benefit is neither clear cut nor easy. The Local Government Amendment Act No 3 requires a clear and justifiable "audit trail on decision-making". And the Act doesn't apply to water levies on councils. It is the individual cities which rate property owners to cover their WRC water levies.

The Water Board Act gives the WRC and cities some 'flexibility' on issues to do with pricing, but changes must be "by agreement", Cr Macaskill says.

"John (Terris) has a valid point to make (on water charges) but it's important it's made with regard to the legislation and the requirements under which we all must operate."

“Horse trading” on issues of regional benefit is neither clear cut nor easy.

- Stuart Macaskill