

Heppner has choice; flood plain or Willow Creek Dam

1978 Dam proposal aired at public meeting

"When you start in 1937 and get two authorizations and still there is no project, it goes beyond being a bad joke—it's not even funny anymore."

With that statement behind him, Steve Hickok, field representative for Sen. Mark Hatfield, opened the latest chapter in the long-running story of the Willow Creek dam—a public meeting aimed at gauging the most recent community response to the controversial and emotional issue. And after some two hours of information, discussion and speculation on the project's impact, it was clear that this time, the "joke" had taken on a new punchline.

Flood plain is the ingredient that has been added this time around and it packs the wallop of threatening the economic livelihood of the entire downtown Heppner business district.

"I haven't seen any community in Oregon faced with as heavy an impact due to the flood plain changes as Heppner is," Hickok said. "Quite simply, the Willow Creek dam would take off the straight jacket that would be put on the economic community."

Backing up Hickok's assessment of the seriousness of the proposed flood plain were two representatives of the Army Corp of Engineers. Both Ron Barrett and Jerry Roediger made it clear that they

weren't trying to sell the project to anybody" but were interested in clearing up any questions or misconceptions concerning the project.

"The flood plain delineation is a quick, fast and dirty process," Barrett said. "It's done by an engineer in Harrisburg, Pa., who over a five to seven year period will determine flood plains for every community in the nation—they make a lot of errors."

Barrett said from the information now available for Heppner, "you're talking about five feet of water on Main Street as being included in the flood plain."

If that should be the case when the final flood plain information is completed, it would virtually put a lid on any future building or major remodeling in the downtown area as well as a good portion of the residential community. When asked if there were any recourse for getting around the flood plain restrictions if the dam is not built, Hickok said, "I really don't see any."

Still, for some residents, the threat of economic stagnation is tempered by another threat—on an emotional level—of living beneath an earth-filled dam. The Corp representatives came to the meeting armed with the technical information and assurances that the project was sound.

Roediger described the pro-

ject as "essentially for flood control" and added it would provide protection for a discharge of the 500 to 700 year frequency. The dam would be capable of containing 11,500 acre-feet of water although most of the time a 2,000 acre-foot pool would be maintained.

The project has been classified as a multi-purpose facility, rather than strictly a flood control project, which makes it eligible for increased federal funding. Roediger said without the multi-purpose tag, approximately \$500,000 to \$600,000 for real estate purchases and roadway relocation would have to be acquired from sources other than the federal government.

Roediger estimated the total cost of the project at \$22.4 million—up \$7.1 million from the 1974 estimate—but added that only \$138,000 would be non-federal costs. He said the financial responsibilities of local residents would be limited to the recreational aspects of the project which could include a park area and boat ramps. Several funding options are open to preclude the need of any of the dam money coming directly from city or county coffers.

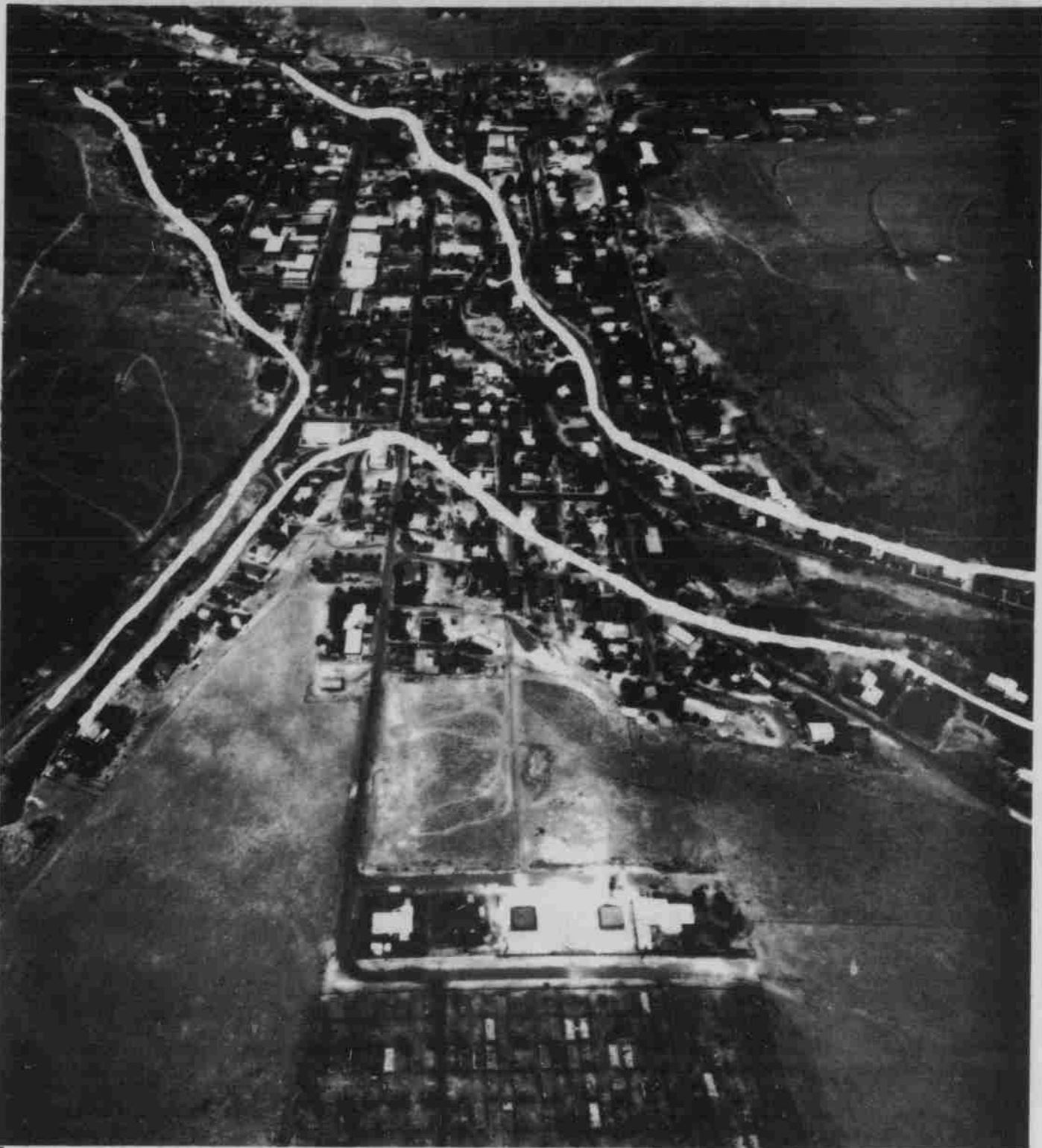
With the dam holding potential benefits from both recreational and irrigation standpoints, the thrust of the issue still is wrapped up in the flood

plain. Barrett said the dam, as proposed, would completely control the flow from both Willow Creek and Balm Fork, thereby "shrinking the flood plain from those two to zero". Heppner would still be faced with possible restrictions from Shobe Canyon and Hinton Creek but Barrett said there was "a strong possibility that flood waters would be contained in the creek channel".

"What you saw coming out of Shobe Creek in 1971 was equivalent to a 100-year discharge and with the addition of drainage ditches up the canyon since then, I think it's safe to say that the overflow would be minimal," Barrett said.

After the presentations were made and questions were answered, a show of hands from the 60 persons in attendance showed nearly a two-to-one preference for proceeding with the project.

"It's an effort we (Sen. Hatfield's office) would undertake only if you wanted us to," Hickok said. "Mark Hatfield is not in the business of ramming projects down people's throats—the best thing to do would be not to touch it with a ten-foot pole." Hickok said there are no assurances of success, "but there is an assurance that the effort will be put forth" if a strong enough mandate demonstrated.



What does flood plain mean for Heppner?

What effect would the construction of Willow Creek Dam have on Heppner's flood plain and could residents of the area be assured that if the dam were constructed, the flood plain would be eliminated?

Chuck Steele, who administers the flood insurance program for Housing and Urban Development (HUD), had some answers for The Gazette-Times this week.

"Generally, I'd never advocate building a dam," said Steele, "but in Heppner's case it is the best possible way to alleviate the flood plain problem."

"The flood plain as it stands now will have a serious effect on Heppner," said Steele, referring to future construction of residential and commercial buildings in the flood plain.

The Flood Insurance Administration requires the city adopt an ordinance showing a flood plain that extends about five feet above Main Street.

The provisions in that ordinance would require that any buildings constructed within that flood plain be elevated five feet off the ground—like on stilts—or that it be flood-proofed to that level.

Flood proofing a building would mean making the building water-tight, such as installing hatch-covers for doors and windows among other things. The cost of flood-proofing can increase the cost of construction by 30-60 per cent.

"We will require that the city enforce these measures and quite frankly, it will be extremely difficult to build," said Steele. Can residents of

the area be assured that if the dam were constructed, the flood plain would be eliminated?

Steele said he thought a firm commitment in that regards could be made.

Corp of Engineers studies have shown that Willow Creek is able to handle the waters of Shobe Canyon in the event of a flood since extensive work in the drainage has been done.

Because a study of the flood

nesses or homes within the flood plain, because those institutions are federally insured.

HUD officials are currently "blinking their eyes" as new construction goes on in Heppner but under the law they could be enforcing some provisions of the ordinance at this time.

Because a study of the flood

plain is being conducted at this time by the Corp of Engineers, the City of Heppner and HUD are forestalling passage of the ordinance.

Asked if the new flood plain study would lower the existing flood plain, Steele indicated the effect would be minimal.

"The flood plain as it stands now will have a serious effect on Heppner"

The flood problem for downtown Heppner comes after waters from Willow Creek, Balm Fork and Shobe Canyon come together.

Steele said construction of the dam would control the waters of Balm Fork and Willow Creek, thereby limiting the flood plain to within a few feet of the channel through town.

What if the City of Heppner refused to pass the ordinance required by the flood insurance program.

"Simply, the City of Heppner wouldn't be in compliance with the flood insurance program and flood insurance would not be available to residents or businessmen," said Steele.

Without flood insurance protection, individuals would not be able to borrow money from commercial lending institutions for construction of busi-

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What is the flood plain ?

The area within the white lines on the above photograph show the approximate flood plain for Heppner—those portions of the city in which construction or extensive

remodeling will be restricted under an ordinance the City Council will be required to adopt within the next year. The line drawing below shows the exact flood plain as used by commercial lending institutions and the Flood Insurance Administration.

The flood plain and ordinance are required before the federal government will provide flood insurance for businesses and homes. If the City of Heppner does not pass the ordinance, flood insurance will not be available in Heppner and consequently, individuals would not be able to

borrow money from commercial lending institutions without meeting rigid construction requirements.

Federal officials have stated that about the only way for Heppner to eliminate the flood plain would be with the construction of the Willow Creek Dam, a controversial and emotional issue that is once again before the residents of Heppner.

Senator Mark Hatfield's office has said funding of the Willow Creek Dam project could be included in this year's Public Works Appropriation Bill and indications are that funds would probably be made available for construction.

In order for funds to be appropriated, city and county officials would have to indicate their support to the Senator by mid-March, about 30 days from now.

A public meeting, sponsored by the Heppner-Morrow County Chamber of Commerce, is tentatively planned for the last week in February from which city and county officials will make their decision.

At a meeting last week there was talk of putting the issue before voters on an "advisory ballot" but legal requirements in publicizing the "advisory ballot" do not allow enough time.

