

# Heppner flood plain lowered by proposed Willow Creek Dam

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**Central business district, some residential areas completely removed from flood plain**

Construction of the Willow Creek Dam would remove more than 10 city blocks—including most of the central business district—from Heppner's flood plain area, according to updated flood plain surveys for the city outlined last week by representatives of the Army Corps of Engineers.

Ron Barrett, head of the Corps' flood plain section, and Jerry Eyestone, the Corps of Engineers' project representative for the dam met last Wednesday with the Morrow County Court, Heppner City Council, and other interested citizens to outline what effects the dam would have on Heppner's flood plain situation.

Maps were displayed showing just how much area would be reduced from Heppner's flood plain with the advent of the Willow Creek Dam (see photos). With the dam, Heppner's 100-year flood depth would be reduced from as much as six feet to no more than four feet, with most of the city's remaining flood plain area lying under one or two feet of water.

New home construction in flood plain areas is not restricted, so long as the main floor level, including basement, is elevated above the 100-year flood level. Extra fill would likely be all that is necessary to build new homes in the flood plain areas with one and two foot depths.

Although \$500,000 has been allocated for the first phase of constructing the \$25 million dam, Barrett indicated that there may still be problems in funding the project.

A cost-to-benefit ratio study on the dam shows that benefits accrued from construction of the dam do not justify its cost. The value of human life that could be saved in the event of a catastrophic flood is not considered in the cost-to-benefit ratio, Barrett noted.

Since "very few projects go with a cost-to-benefit of less than one," Barrett stated that the Corps plans to explore ways of reducing the price tag of the project. "If costs cannot be reduced," Barrett said, "the economic analysis report will be submitted with project justification, based on providing structural protection, plus protection against the potential loss of life."

Barrett also noted that if "local support for the dam is relatively weak," support from Oregon's representatives in Congress could be expected to be equally weak in seeing that continuing funding is allocated.

Due to the relatively austere mood of the Carter administration, seeing the dam through to completion "will still be an uphill battle...it's no sure thing," stated Sen. Mark Hatfield's aide, Lon Fendal. Although the dam would

substantially lower Heppner's flood plain, Barrett stated that "we need to keep in perspective that the primary function of the Heppner Dam project is to eliminate or strongly reduce flood flows coming out of Willow Creek above Heppner. The project will soften the regulatory aspects of the National Flood Insurance program, but this fact should be recognized as an added benefit or bonus. It is not a project function."

Barrett added that the Corps is also considering alternative plans to the large, earth-fill Willow Creek Dam, including a proposal to construct three smaller dams along Willow, Shobe and Hinton creeks. That alternative, along with a proposal for constructing a concrete channelway through Heppner, are being studied by a Corps of Engineers Value Engineering study team. It is not yet known whether the alternatives would be as cost effective as the dam. The study is expected to be completed at the end of January.

All preliminary paperwork for the proposed dam is scheduled to be completed by July, with right-of-way negotiations to follow. City water tanks would then be relocated, and the Willow Creek highway would be relocated around Cemetery Hill to balm fork past the dam's backwater area. Barrett said that under the current timetable, water intake towers for the spillway would be constructed starting in March of 1980, with the main contract for clearing the reservoir lake site to be let in March of 1981. Construction on the dam itself is expected to be complete in March of 1982.

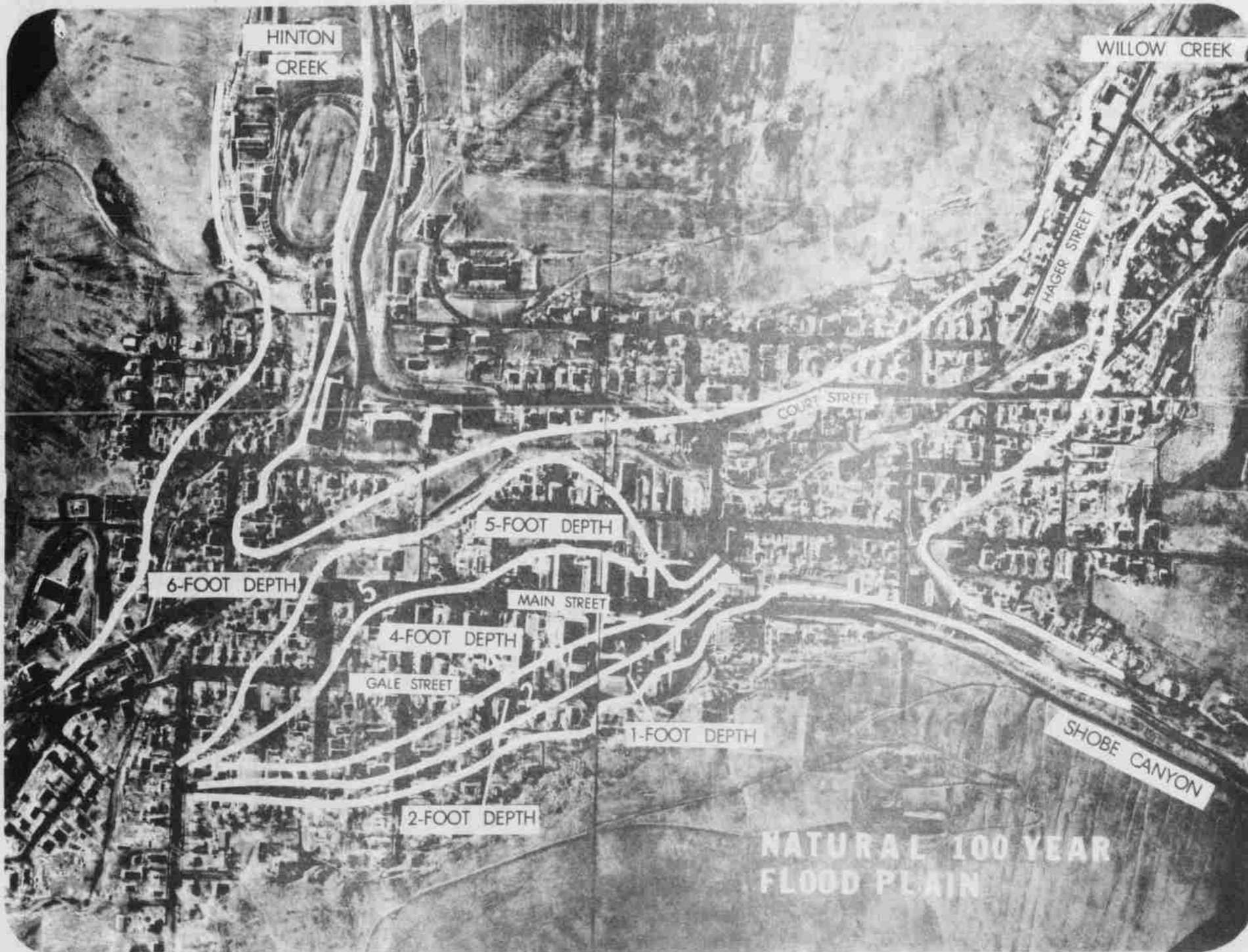
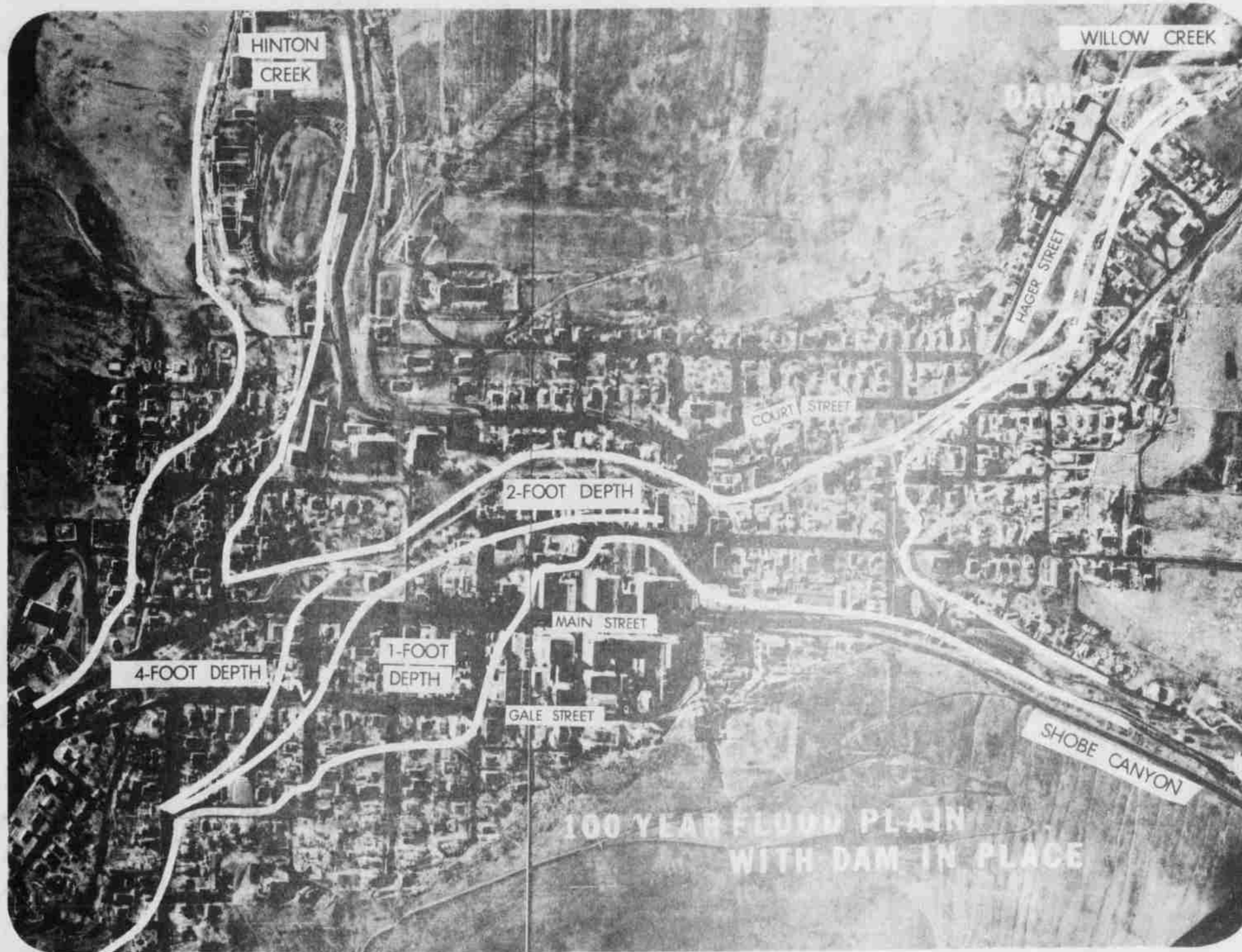
The 1.7 mile long, 242-acre lake could handle resident trout and warm water species, such as bass, Barrett said. Glen Ward of the state Fish and Wildlife Commission argued that trout would not be likely to thrive in the lake, due to a raised water temperature.

Plans also call for building a picnic area on a bluff overlooking the Balm Fork arm of the lake, and a boat launch site along the opposite shore.

The dam would be ungated, discharging water on a "fill and spill" basis.

The dam was designed to handle the most severe flooding situation likely to occur along Willow Creek within a 700 year period. However, the dam does not control the flow of Shobe or Hinton Creeks, which is why a significant portion of the city remains in flood plain zones.

A Corps of Engineers request for public comment on the dam prior to a Jan. 29 deadline dealt only with comments on how water quality would be affected during the construction process. Public hearings on the dam itself have yet to be scheduled.



Story By Rick Steelhammer

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officials outlined the flood plain for Heppner in a public meeting last week at the Courthouse, both with and without construction of the proposed Willow Creek Dam. As shown in the photographs above, the Willow Creek Dam if constructed, would lower the city's flood plain substantially, not only in terms of total area, but also in depth throughout the flood plain area.