

2010 02 10 Alamosa Trees
by Marilyn Loser

The Levee: Inform, listen, engage, decide -- then act

I love walking along the Rio Grande through Alamosa. The beautiful green of summer cottonwoods and willows against the blue of the river and sky always raises my spirits. But, are these grand trees along the public path and those near private homes a threat to the levee's integrity and hence to our safety? The Army Corps of Engineers apparently thinks so, according to a report issued in December, 2008. This report is based on a September, 2008, on-site inspection.

The Corps constructed the levee in 1997, when existing large trees were there. According to residents whose homes back up to the levee, the Corps took special consideration to preserve these trees while constructing the levee. Now the Corps says the trees must go due to criteria changes for levee certification. Unhappy residents are up in arms.

The Corps' certification guidelines for "unwanted vegetation growth" require that the "vegetation-free zone extends 15 feet from both the landside and riverside toes of the levee to the centerline of the tree." Many levee trees in Alamosa are within this 15-foot zone.

Another area in which Alamosa received an unacceptable rating is the "Encroachments" category. Certification guidelines state "unauthorized encroachments or inappropriate activities noted are likely to inhibit operations and maintenance, emergency operations, or negatively impact the integrity of the levee." Photos documented many fences across the levee in addition to trees, sprinklers, a hot tub, and other landscaping.

The City Council held a work session regarding the levee on January 20, when only a handful of people attended. After a presentation by Don Koskelin, Director of Public Works, the Council held a brief discussion and mentioned the need for citizen input.

This is an incredibly important issue that requires an INFORMED citizenry. The draft recommendations for a national levee safety program (January 2009) state that good decision making relies on good information and the "rehabilitation of levees in the U.S. must be justified by more and better quality information than currently exists." Is the change in Corps guidelines only due to the Katrina aftermath? Is there any good information regarding Alamosa's levee? Nathan Cherpeski, City Manager, told me that the Corps' river levee guidelines were based on earth dams, not levees. Pete Magee, Alamosa County Emergency Manager, said our floods are not flash floods. He said the river level tends to rise and lower slowly. Given this, an earthen dam model might not be out of line.

In the last year a number of national articles have raised the issue of whether trees have ever been shown to harm a levee. Some states, such as Maine, state on their website that "stands of full-grown trees protect stream banks from erosion through the binding of soil with their roots." What are the science and data behind these assertions? Are all trees equally hazardous? It seems a large, raggedy tree hanging out over the river at an alarming angle is more likely to fall into the

river than a healthy, maintained one standing straight and tall on the land side of the levee. But maybe it really is the entire root system that is the problem, allowing water to be piped through the levee due to river-water pressure during flooding. I don't know. Who can tell us?

What can we learn from local professionals who have monitored the Rio Grande over the years, especially the most recent high water years of 1987, 1986, and 1985? Let's hear from them at a public meeting.

We need clearly written documentation that presents specific issues, avenues of action along with associated risks, possible consequences, individual responsibilities and costs. Generalities are not enough.

Once the public has been informed, it would be time for the City Council to LISTEN to what we have to say. Input based on emotion rather than data will not protect our city. On the other hand, action based on reactive disaster policies that would condemn hundreds of old trees without reason would be dreadful.

Decision makers and citizens must all be ENGAGED in the information and problem-solving process. We need more than five citizens at a meeting, and we need well-informed decision makers. On unclear and complicated issues, we should ACT only after we are informed. I don't consider delaying and hoping the whole thing will go away to be acceptable action. The report has been out for more than a year. We need to get going.

"Leadership must always start from a clear-eyed view of how things really are." Stephen Flynn, The Edge of Disaster