

2010 02 24 Alamosa Trees
by Marilyn Loser

The Levee: Let's not stick our heads in the wet sand

We need public forums to learn about and discuss Alamosa levee issues. The agenda for a recent City Council mini-retreat listed: "Levee-Should we develop a citizen focus group/task force to assist with this issue?" According to Nathan Cherpeski, City Manager, the Council discussed hosting at least one public forum, probably beginning in April.

At these forums we need plenty of Alamosa citizens AND people with Rio Grande and flood expertise. We need to hear from those who actually walked the saturated levee and shored it up during high-water years of 1987, 1986, 1985, and 1979. We need to hear from representatives of the Army Corps of Engineers and FEMA since they are involved in levee inspection, certification, and post-flood repair and rehabilitation. We need to understand why the levee, with its nearby large trees, was certified in 1997, but wouldn't be certified today.

We need to hear about the consequences of having an uncertified levee. Perhaps we need to hear from insurance company representatives. Apparently one of the consequences of an uncertified levee would be that many homeowners would have to purchase flood insurance. Many, if not all, of the houses along the levee are above the 100-year flood plain, but many houses south of the levee are not.

We need to hear from people such as Steve Vandiver, General Manager of the Rio Grande Water Conservation District. Previously a water engineer for 25 years in the San Luis Valley, he was one of those who walked the levees in high water years. He has an understanding of our local situation. We need to hear from Pete Magee, the Alamosa County Emergency Manager who is working on a Valley hazard mitigation plan.

The Alamosa Tree Board would like the forums to have a facilitator and ground rules so all voices can be heard. The Board would also like presentations of science-based information.

The February 10 Alamosa Trees column gave an overview of the Corps' December 2008 levee report. The column is posted at the new Alamosa Trees blog: <http://www.alamosatrees.net/blog>. Take a look and add your comments to the discussion.

While levee trees seem to be a sensitive issue, it is not the only issue. The Corps' report cited numerous "Encroachments" on the levee. Photos documented many fences across the levee in addition to trees, sprinklers, a hot tub, and other landscaping.

If an emergency or maintenance vehicle needed access to the entire levee, it wouldn't be able to do so. What type of levee access do emergency or maintenance vehicles require?

Some of the fences crossing the levee have locked gates, others have no gates. All of these fences are on private property. In fact, many levee landowners own the property to the middle of the river. However, landowners' easements require them to allow the city and Corps access to the levee, according to Nathan Cherpeski, City Manager.

Is this a hazard? What steps have been taken to address this issue in the more than a year that has elapsed since the Corps issued its report?

During times of low water and drought, the idea of a flood seems far-fetched. While floods are infrequent, data for the Rio Grande at Del Norte and Alamosa show high water about every 10 - 15 years.

I've heard some people say it won't flood in Alamosa, that the river will jump its banks and flood upstream. Vandiver says all this does is buy us some time. Our floods are not flash floods. Rather, high water lasts for several weeks. Once the upriver areas are flooded, the relentless water has to go somewhere so it moves downriver to Alamosa. In fact, after the river level decreases in Del Norte it takes some time before the level decreases in Alamosa. Much of the water that flooded upstream still needs to drain back into the system.

Whether the sand is wet or dry, we need to keep our heads above water and address the issue now. As Mayor Kathy Rogers stated at the City Council January 26 work session, "Not doing anything is not an option."

"We started singin' bye bye Miss American Pie. Drove my Chevy to the levee, but the levee was dry." Don McLean