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Corps: C.R. levee plan too costly

By Adam Belz

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CEDAR RAPIDS -- Hopes for a levee and flood wall system in Cedar Rapids took a body blow Monday as the Army Corps of Engineers said protection at the 2008 flood level will cost twice as much as the damage it would prevent.

Cost-effectiveness won't improve when the Corps analyzes levee protection to the 100- and 500-year flood levels, Cedar Rapids City Manager Jim Prosser said.

A 500- or 100-year levee system won't cost significantly less than one that protects to the 2008 flood level, and the benefit drops with the level of the levee .

The Corps can't recommend Congress fund a levee project unless its benefit at least equals its cost. Cedar Rapids ' preferred plan has a benefit-to-cost ratio in the 0.4 to 0.5 range. Congress can ignore Corps analysis and fund the project without a recommendation, but "typically they don't," said Ron Fournier, a spokesman for the Corps office in Rock Island, Ill.

Management of the upstream Cedar River watershed is now even more crucial, Cedar Rapids Mayor-elect Ron Corbett said, and the future of levees in Cedar Rapids is up to the congressional delegation -- Sens. Tom Harkin and Chuck Grassley, and Reps. Dave Loebsack and Bruce Braley.

"We always knew that a certain piece of this was going to be on their shoulders," Corbett said. "Now that burden's just a little heavier."

The City Council may revisit its policy of denying Jumpstart housing rehab funds to homes in the levee construction zone, Corbett said. Some 550 homes in the zone have not been eligible for Jumpstart, because the money was limited and the city was concerned it could be wasted on homes that would later be bought out.

"There will certainly be some pressure from citizens to have us review that decision," he said.

The Corps will complete its study June 30 and calculate cost-benefit ratios for several flood protection plans , Fournier said. Possibilities include protecting one side of the river but not the other or limited protection for specific areas, such as the downtown and Quaker.

"There may be a half-dozen alternatives that we can recommend, or there may be none," Fournier said.

Not getting a Corps recommendation doesn't eliminate the possibility of federal funding for levees in Cedar Rapids ; neither does a Corps recommendation guarantee funding. Authorization is up to Congress, and even then, dozens of flood projects across the country have already been authorized but still await funding, Fournier said.