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Sebastopol officials move to modify flood remapping

BY TOM ROTH

Sebastopol officials are unhappy with a flood map drawn by the Army Corps of Engineers, and have asked a county agency to provide information needed to modify boundaries they fear would choke the city's commercial center.

At a press conference held at a home overlooking green fields and the Laguna, environmentalists set on preserving the

Laguna had hoped to announce that the Army Corps of Engineers had designated the entire Laguna area under historical flood levels, a "floodway." The designation would have made it unlawful to build or fill in those areas or for property owners to get federal flood insurance.

The Laguna is now designated a floodplain, which means flood control jurisdiction is left to local, not federal, agencies.

But the preservationists learned that the

Corps-drawn map was only a preliminary chart, which would probably be modified. Bob Sharp, a biologist and chair of Sebastopol's Laguna Advisory Committee, charged that city officials had sought to exempt low-lying parts of the city from the floodway designation.

Preservationists say they are concerned about building or filling in the Laguna not only because it destroys a valuable

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LAGUNA

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wetlands habitat, but also because the Laguna is a holding basin for floodwaters. At the press conference, activist Helen Libeau dropped pennies in a cup of water to demonstrate how fill displaces water and sends it downstream to places like Guerneville and Monte Rio.

Libeau told reporters that Bill Brick of the Army Corps of Engineers Water Resources Branch told her "initially a floodway is developed technically, then tempered politically."

Brick was on vacation this week and could not be reached for comment.

According to several sources, two weeks ago a meeting was held where Brick presented a preliminary floodway map to city officials and Supervisor Ernie Carpenter. At that meeting, Sebastopol City Manager Mel Davis asked the Sonoma County Water Agency to conduct a study to see if it was hydrologically feasible to exempt areas in Sebastopol under 76 feet.

Davis could not be reached for comment.

"There's a large part of Sebastopol that is under 76 feet, that's pretty obvious," said city engineer Paul Schock. "There's certainly concern that designating the heart of the city's commercial area [a floodway] could be disastrous for the city."

Schock said that the small incorporated area of the city below the 76-foot floodline was inconsequential in comparison with the 7000-acre Laguna area.

Water Agency director Bob Beach said that the Federal Emergency Management Agency which funded the Army Corps study said it would not pay for more work on the remapping. Sebastopol officials then asked the Beach Water Agency to provide the technical information needed to redraw the floodway boundaries.

"We indicated that we'd do it, but we're only looking at it," said Beach.

"I support locking that area in downtown Sebastopol that is already developed out of the floodway," said west county Supervisor Ernie Carpenter. Other flood-prone areas needed further analysis, he said.

According to Libeau, Laguna protectionists

are in agreement that already developed areas of Sebastopol should be not be affected by a floodway designation, except that property owners should not be allowed to bring in new fill unless an equal amount of fill is removed from sites.

What may be the final bone of contention are areas below the flood level zoned for development within Sebastopol's city limits.

More heartening news for Laguna advocates came this week from Congressman Doug Bosco. Bosco, D-Occidental, said he supports Laguna restoration efforts and that he will introduce a bill to establish a Laguna National Wildlife Refuge.

Bosco aide Joel Rogers said that the bill would require Congress to appropriate funds. The federal designation, said Rogers, would give umbrella authority to the National Fish and Wildlife Service to deal with the Laguna's environmental problems.

Rogers said Bosco has had previous success in expanding a wildlife refuge near Humboldt Bay.

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presumably allows more salmon to spawn, and