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The Journal Gazette
The News-Sentinel

Army Corps collects data on '03 flood

By Dan Stockman
The Journal Gazette

As hydrologists and flood engineers nearby discuss elevations, outfalls and high-water marks, a different image haunts Cathy Robb.

Nine months after the Flood of '03, the battle against the ever-rising waters of the St. Marys River has changed to one fought via computer models and global positioning devices.

But even while a six-member team from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers finished its field work Thursday in Fort Wayne, Robb couldn't shake the July memories - a fight using sandbags and pumps.

Robb, the city's flood maintenance supervisor, was helping along Park Avenue, one of the many little neighborhoods between the river and Thompson Avenue, off Broadway. There, she was approached by a man holding a baby who said he had four other children younger than 7 and water was coming in his house.

He needed help and didn't know where to turn.

"That picture when I was out here . . . I just . . . it kinda haunts me," Robb said. "I just felt so bad for them. That whole week - that picture - it was just awful."

It is those images that drive the effort to make sure it never happens again, or at least if it does, that the effects will be as diminished as possible.

The Army Corps, which built the massive flood control project along the St. Marys, St. Joseph and Maumee rivers, is now studying the unprotected portions of the St. Marys, Fairfield Ditch and the city's Early Flood Warning System to see whether improvements can be made.

The team spent all day in the field Wednesday and most of the morning Thursday, taking photos and video. Their work will determine whether there is a "federal interest" in studying further, meaning the benefit of a flood control project would outweigh the cost. That would let the year-and-a-half-long studies continue, ultimately arriving at a recommendation for solving the problems, and finally construction.

"It certainly appears as if the Corps will be able to continue on with the feasibility phase," Army Corps Project Manager Carl Platz said. Officials will know for sure this summer.

The studies will look at things such as levees and flood walls, as well as solutions such as using parks and golf courses for flood storage.

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"Being in the field is invaluable," Platz said as the team drove between site visits, comparing what they saw with topographical maps and aerial photos.

As devastating as the Flood of '03 was - it did at least \$10 million damage in the region and wrecked hundreds of homes - it is also yielding a wealth of data collected during its weeklong fury. Engineers now know exactly where the water goes when it reaches certain elevations, things they normally would have to estimate on a computer.

"A lot of times you're basing your studies on events that haven't happened," Platz said.

One area the team looked at Thursday was the area around Fairview Golf Course at Tillman Road and Fairfield Avenue. The waters there rose so quickly last year that animals at Southtown Veterinary Hospital had to be evacuated by canoe.

City officials had floated the idea of a flood wall along the river there, but Army Corps officials said it might be better to allow the golf course to store floodwater but make the area drain better with a dramatically larger culvert at the north end near Southfair Court.

That would leave a few buildings in harm's way, but protecting them with sandbags might be easier than risking hundreds of others by putting billions of gallons of water back in the river.

"We have to look at what's the best bang for the buck," Platz said. For example, where the culvert would cross Fairfield Avenue, it might make more sense to let the water flood a bridge used for park access along the river than spend money to raise the bridge.

In the Belle Vista neighborhood in Waynedale, the small levees along Fairfield Ditch might need to be raised, and the team scurried over the bridge and stream banks there, pacing off rights of way.

Jihad Safa, a design engineer for the Army Corps, quickly covered a steno-pad page with sketches of the stream's profile, as well as an aerial sketch of the bridge and banks nearby, while team members and city officials wondered aloud whether there was room for bigger levies and what construction easements would be needed. Hydraulic engineer Mary Jesionowski scrambled around the area shooting video to help her visualize the calculations she will make later.

"No matter what, these people (in Belle Vista) should be really happy because we're doing something," said Kim Stier, the city's flood control coordinator. "We don't know what yet, but there will be something."

Dick Knappenberger, an area flooding coordinator for the city, said the neighborhood faces three problems: water coming from sanitary sewers, from storm sewers, and rising out of Fairfield Ditch.

The city has already made improvements to the storm sewers, which made the 2003 fight much easier; the Army Corps is studying the ditch; and there might be a solution to the sanitary sewer problem, as well.

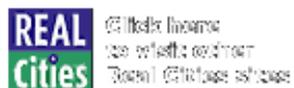
Knappenberger said it appears water is entering the sewer at the St. Marys River near Rudisill Boulevard and overflowing in Belle Vista. New equipment that can analyze sewage so it can be traced will find out for sure, and a special gate could prevent river water from inundating the sewer line, he said.

"We might be able to handle it with one pump, then, instead of six," Knappenberger said.

Platz said the task now will be to summarize what the team has learned and begin analyzing the data so a preliminary report can be made on the federal interest question.

"We'll try to wrap our arms around it and organize it," he said. "We'll look at some alternates, also some non-structural alternates and what the impacts would be on downstream areas."

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