

METRO 2021 LEGISLATIVE ISSUE IDENTIFICATION

Person completing form/Department: Anneliese Koehler, GAPD

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ISSUE: Levee Ready Columbia

BACKGROUND: Four drainage districts along the Columbia Corridor provide flood protection at times of high water on the Columbia River through a system of levees and pumps. While each drainage district is an independent entity, they work together in close collaboration to manage the system and protect the area from flooding. The flood protection system must maintain compliance with the requirements of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in order to maintain certification and accreditation. In addition, the system must maintain compliance with the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) which would assist in flood fighting and repairs in the event of a flood. As a result of new safety standards put into place for levees after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and Superstorm Sandy in 2012, FEMA certification has expired in all four districts. So far, however, FEMA and USACE have agreed that as long as demonstrable progress is being made to address the deficiencies within the levee system, accreditation will not be revoked.

Levee Ready Columbia is a partnership created to address these deficiencies in the levee system. It is comprised of Metro, the Port of Portland, Multnomah County, the four cities along the Columbia Corridor, the four drainage districts and many interested stakeholders. In addition to addressing the physical deficiencies of the system, this partnership also advances solutions to ongoing governance and funding issues.

Additionally, the floodplain is home to historic Vanport. At one time, Vanport was the most racially diverse city in Oregon, home to many of Oregon's black residents. When the 1948 Flood of Vanport destroyed the city, nearly a third of the residents left homeless were black. Historic Vanport continues to be a place of cultural and historical significance to many in the black community.

RECOMMENDATION: Advance funding opportunities to support the efforts of Levee Ready Columbia and the flood protection system. This includes a request for \$10 million in lottery bond proceeds for levees statewide to replace some of the bond dollars that were authorized but not issued in 2019 (see below).

LEGISLATIVE HISTORY: In 2019, the Legislature passed SB 431, which created a new flood protection district in urban Multnomah County. This district would eventually consolidate the existing four districts into one and identify an ongoing, stable funding source to facilitate maintenance of the flood protection system. The legislation also authorized an interim board to identify the ongoing funding source and stand up the new district.

The Legislature also authorized \$15 million in lottery bonds for levees statewide in 2019. However, due to the sharp decline in lottery revenue because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Legislature canceled the issuances of those bonds.

Additionally, the technical investigation and assessments completed by Levee Ready Columbia have been in part facilitated by the Business Oregon Infrastructure Finance Authority's Levee Assistance Fund, also created by the Legislature.

OTHER INTERESTED PARTIES: Levee Ready Columbia is a partnership of Metro, the Port of Portland, Multnomah County, the four cities along the Columbia Corridor, the four drainage districts and many interested stakeholders.

IMPACT IF PROPOSED ACTION OCCURS: Funding would provide much needed resources to address repairs and maintenance of the levee system. It would help protect the levee system from failure and prevent negative economic, historical, cultural and environmental impacts. Should the levee system fail during a major flood on the Columbia River, the Oregon Department of Geology and Mineral Industries estimates the following impacts:

- About 7,500 residents live in the area and approximately 75 percent would be at risk of being displaced.
- Depending on the location of the levee failure, up to 75 percent of local businesses could be forced to close. 63 to 73 percent of business would still be closed one year after the flood.
- Hazardous materials are stored in the area; should they become exposed to floodwater, they could cause health hazards and ecological damage to the area and downstream.
- Critical infrastructure in the area could be damaged or destroyed, including three interstate highways, three water treatment facilities, eight electrical substations and two natural gas facilities.
- Important habitat for endangered and protected species in the floodplain, including over 2,000 acres of parks, open spaces and recreational areas, could be damaged and destroyed.