

THE OPINION OF THE RGJ EDITORIAL BOARD

Area residents have waited too long for feds to OK flood plans

When the planning began shortly after the New Year's Flood of 1997 to protect the Truckee Meadows against another deluge, it was well understood that it would be a long, drawn-out process because it involved federal agencies and federal funds.

Few imagined, however, that 13 years would pass and there still would be little progress on turning those plans into reality.

Now we're told that it will be at least *another* two years before the community-designed project gets the go-ahead from the feds, two more years in which Reno-Sparks residents can only hope that the Truckee Meadows stays in its banks until then.

Fifteen years just to win authorization for a project that is so critical to this community is completely unacceptable. It is, in fact, absurd.

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Certainly the voters in Washoe County didn't expect that it would take this long to get the OK for the project when they approved a sales-tax increase to help pay for the local planning of much-needed flood-control measures more than a decade ago.

Nor did those citizens who spent so many hours developing the plan that would return the river to its natural state as it passed through the Truckee Meadows, giving flood water room to spread out, slowing down high water flows and preventing the water from backing up as it sped into the narrow Truckee River Canyon east of Sparks.

Yet, here we are in 2010, and the Army Corps of Engineers, which has authority over "navigable" waterways in the U.S., is telling us that mistakes made in the modeling of possible alternatives to the locally preferred plan will extend the delay until at least 2012.

The good news is that Reno, Sparks and Washoe County have not stood still while they waited for the Corps



MARILYN NEWTON/RGJ

A building in the industrial area along North Edison collapsed into the Truckee River during the 1997 flood.

SNAPSHOT

TOPIC: Truckee River project

OUR VIEW: As each year passes, the danger of the delays for Reno-Sparks increases.

of Engineers to do its job. They've taken what opportunities there have been to accomplish small pieces of the overall project, such as restoring some downstream areas to their natural state. Much of the work undoes work done years ago by the corps in response to earlier floods. Those projects — straightening the river channel and guiding the water with high flood walls — seemed liked good ideas at the time but since then have been shown to be exactly the wrong way to deal with a river.

There are limits, however, to how much flood project officials can do with only local resources; there also are limits to what they can do to the river without the cooperation of the corps.

The biggest danger, is that memories of the 1997 flood will fade with the passage of time. It's too easy to start thinking: We've survived floods before, and we'll survive floods in the future.

The 1997 flood was not just another flood. Repairing the damage cost an estimated \$680 million, a sum that would be far higher today ... and will only get higher as the years pass. It led to the demise of some businesses, particularly in downtown Reno, forced the closure of Reno-Tahoe International Airport, severely damaged homes and was blamed for at least one death.

This community simply cannot afford a repeat of the 1997 flood. That's why it's important that flood planners continue looking for work that can be done while we wait for federal approval, including a proposal to create a flood control district to help fund future projects.

But the Corps of Engineers also has a responsibility to complete its part of the agreement. We've already waited long enough. Let's get a move on it.

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