

Flood Protection in Manitoba; Charting A New Course

One of the most memorable images of 2003 was the site of massive forest fires advancing on communities in British Columbia's Okanagan Valley. The faces of the residents whose homes were destroyed said it all.

It was an image that brought back memories of the 1997 Manitoba flood. Like the flood, the final chapter of the Okanagan fire was about the human spirit. The enduring Canadian values of community, sharing and perseverance prevailed.

Today, in the Okanagan, homes are being rebuilt and people are trying to get their lives back to normal. Now, they are asking authorities to do everything they possibly can to ensure it never happens again.

In the aftermath of the 1997 flood, Manitobans were doing the same thing. The International Joint Commission (IJC) studied ways to better protect the residents of the Red River Basin from severe floods. Thousands of hours of consultations were conducted.

The IJC concluded if no action was taken to improve flood protection in Manitoba, there would be a 37% chance of a repeat of the 1997 flood within 50 years. The IJC recommended two specific flood protection options that would decrease that risk.

Additional consultation concluded the expansion of the current floodway was the best option for increased flood protection. It would reduce the risk of a 1997 repeat to just 7% over the next half-century and significantly reduce the risk to rural Manitobans living south of the floodway.

In this light, all levels of government should be congratulated for their commitment to flood protection in southern Manitoba. Following the 1997 flood, the Government of Canada and Province of Manitoba jointly invested \$130 million in flood protection - \$110 million for rural residents in the Red River Valley.

Over the last ten months, Canada and Manitoba have announced more than \$240 million to begin work on the \$700 million floodway expansion – more than one-third the cost. In fact, Canada has recognized the project as a national priority.

In addition, the City of Winnipeg has indicated their strong intention to make substantial upgrades to their flood protection infrastructure.

The Manitoba Floodway Expansion Authority has been established to oversee the planning and management of the project. The Authority is committed to providing increased flood protection to as many Manitobans as possible. It will provide excellence in project management, be inclusive and encourage innovation.

The Authority also intends to maximize economic development opportunities associated with the expansion – a clear priority that emerged during public consultation. As one of the largest capital projects in Manitoba history, the project will result in both direct and indirect opportunities and thousands of jobs.

There will be opportunities in the construction, design, consulting and engineering sectors as we begin to move dirt, improve railway and highway bridges, upgrade dikes and strengthen utilities, floodgates, pump stations and control structures.

There will be opportunities to promote environmental technologies, develop labour training and research partnerships.

There will be opportunities for local small businesses and aboriginal entrepreneurs – particularly in the tourism and recreation sectors. The Authority plans to issue a general call for expressions of interest in the coming weeks to help develop a concise economic development partnership plan.

And, by increasing flood protection, local property values will stabilize. To this end, the Government of Manitoba has committed to develop and introduce comprehensive compensation legislation this spring to ensure certainty for effected residents *before* a crisis instead of uncertainty and legal pursuits *after* the fact.

The floodway expansion is a win-win. The cost/benefit analysis of the investment is obvious. Following the severe 1950 flood, Canada and Manitoba built the current floodway for \$63 million. This investment has saved us from an estimated \$8.6 billion in losses over the last 40 years. The proposed floodway would protect residents from a flood the size of 1826 – the largest ever recorded in Manitoba.

The Authority wants to invite Manitobans to have their say on the project and help shape the future of their communities – particularly as it relates to protecting the environment.

Canada and Manitoba have agreed to a cooperative environmental review process to be led by the Manitoba Clean Environment Commission and consistent with the *Canadian Environmental Assessment Act*.

The first stage of the independent environmental review process is being initiated this month. It will build upon previous consultations and go far beyond the environmental protection standards used to construct the original floodway. More information about the process is available at **www.floodwayeia.com**.

The bottom line is the full expansion of the floodway will dramatically improve the quality of life for Manitobans by helping to make residents more secure, improving the environment, providing economic development opportunities and establishing an international model for public consultation and community involvement.

- *Ernie Gilroy, CEO
Manitoba Floodway Authority*