

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

ContraCostaTimes.com

Bethel Island leaders worry about condition of levee as money runs dry

By Roman Gokhman
Contra Costa Times

Posted: 04/02/2011 12:00:00 AM PDT

Updated: 04/02/2011 08:50:23 AM PDT

BETHEL ISLAND -- Some parts of the Bethel Island levee -- the only protection the Delta island has from flooding -- dip down in front of waterfront homes. Some parts are barely wide enough for a service truck to pass on.

The cash-strapped district that manages the island's earthen levee will most likely try a second time to persuade voters to approve a parcel tax to repair it.

A proposed tax was soundly defeated last November, surprising board members of the Bethel Island Municipal Improvement District, who were forced to postpone the repairs, close their office on Fridays and lay off two of the district's five employees, including its manager.

The earliest a new measure would go before voters is November 2012, board President Dan Phippen said.

Measure X failed because a few vocal opponents made their voices heard while supporters did not organize until it was too late, said Phippen and Steve Spence, the district's former manager.

"We need to do some PR work before we can try this again," Phippen said.

Bethel Island is surrounded by more than 11.5 miles of levee that protects the island, the majority of which sits 10 feet below sea level.

In California, levees are required to be 11.2 feet above sea level and 16 feet wide at the crown, Phippen said. About 2,400 feet of the island's levee is either 8 feet tall or only 12 feet wide at the top.

"We need a minimum of 16 feet to get a fire truck out

here," Spence

said.

Additionally, the levees are continually eroding and suffering damage by beavers and rodents.

"There are two kinds of earthen levees: The ones that broke and the ones that will break," Spence said.

The municipal improvement district saw property tax revenue take a double-digit percentage dive over the past two years and collected nearly 24 percent less during the 2009-2010 fiscal year than the prior year -- \$412,395 from \$543,371. Based on preliminary figures, taxes are predicted to fall again, to about \$390,000 in 2010-2011.

Measure X called for an annual tax of \$252.29 on every parcel except those that are located completely underwater. Of Bethel Island's 1,822 parcels, 222 would have been exempt.

The tax would have generated about \$4 million over its 10-year life span, money that the district planned to use to pay its share of a \$6.6 million project the state Department of Water Resources was underwriting.

The maintenance work would have involved raising sections of the levee that aren't at the mandated minimum height and shoring up the layer of rock that prevents water from eroding the outer face.

The district would also ensure that debris doesn't

Fast, convenient,
AND affordable

Save on select
Wireless*
All-in-Ones,
Photo Printers
and Lasers

Save Today

Limited time offers

Shop Now >

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

ContraCostaTimes.com

clog the drainage ditches that collect water that seeps through the levee.

Only 291 residents voted for the tax, and 405 opposed it; the measure required two-thirds approval.

Residents Janet and Todd Northam don't trust the district to spend their money wisely. They say the district previously mismanaged money, spending some on an internal harassment investigation and litigation, which Spence acknowledged.

"All that money should have gone toward fixing the levee," Janet Northam said.

Phippen acknowledged \$1,000 was spent on an investigator for the harassment investigation -- which ended without any action being taken -- and said a previous lawsuit, filed by a resident after the district performed some work without first getting approval, was the fault of former board members. The district lost the suit and paid a \$100,000 settlement.

The district has few options other than a parcel tax. A committee is researching grant opportunities and whether to ask property owners to approve a benefit assessment district in a mail-in election that can be held at any time.

Assessments link the cost of public improvements to the properties that directly benefit from them, and the per-parcel amount varies according to how much benefit each property owner derives from the work.

Property owners are allotted a differing number of votes depending on how much real estate they have, which means that a few large landowners can decide the outcome of the election.

The district plans to finalize a plan this summer, and Phippen said only one thing is clear.

"Major rehab to the levee is not going to happen until we get the money," he said.

Contact Roman Gokhman at 925-779-7189. Follow him at [Twitter.com/RomiTheWriter](https://twitter.com/RomiTheWriter).

