

Thurston County's plea to Gregoire: We need aid now

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The Olympian

ROCHESTER — State lawmakers said Tuesday that they will lobby Gov. Chris Gregoire today to enlist her clout in adding Thurston County to the federal disaster declaration for individual aid programs.

"This is just tragic," state Sen. Karen Fraser said after listening to emotional testimony from county residents whose homes were ruined by flooding.

"Thurston County should be part of the federal aid; political boundaries shouldn't decide this."

Fraser, D-Olympia, and state Sen. Dan Swecker, R-Rochester, were two of more than 150 people at a packed community meeting at Rochester High School. They said they plan to contact the governor today.

On Thursday, state emergency officials will tour the flood-damaged areas to see whether the county can qualify for Federal Emergency Management Agency aid for individual property owners, said Kurt Hardin of the state emergency management division.

Thurston County was included in President Bush's federal disaster declaration over the weekend, but the county was not immediately granted the individual FEMA aid programs that have been extended to flood victims in Lewis and Grays Harbor counties.

"What I want to tell you is that it's not too late," Hardin told the group.

Residents, some holding back tears and others expressing frustration, said they shouldn't have to bear the brunt of what they called bad decisions by officials who approved construction and development around them, pushing water onto their homes.

"They've got to stop building where the water is supposed to go," Judy McWhinney said. "They say don't blame Wal-Mart; I blame Wal-Mart."

McWhinney said her parents, George and Geneva Brown of Rochester, had 2 feet of water in their homes.

"I'm 46; I can clean up my place and move on," McWhinney said. "But some people can't; there's a lot of older people out here."

She said her parents' house "stinks so bad, it's never going to go away."

After she finished speaking and sat down, her mother wept on her shoulder.

Others pointed to silt-filled creeks, clear-cutting of timber and ill-placed dikes as the culprits.

"We have neighbors who lived here all their lives, and there's never been water at this location inside their homes," said Jared Snyder of Helsing Junction Farm in Rochester. "This time, there was water inside the homes."

Darrin Spencer said he raised his house 4 feet after the 1996 flood. Now, he said, he's thinking of raising it 3 more feet.

"My question now is: Is 3 feet going to be enough?" he said. "Who's going to tell me how high to raise my house?"

Others grappled with the causes of the devastation.

Sue Reed said water came in her home on Bordeaux Road by 8:30 a.m. the first day of the flood. She said a new housing development had been built nearby.

"The county needs to look at this and find out why it's happening," she said.

Dianne Devlin lost her business, Totem Espresso.

"It was supposed to be OK; they told me it was in a 100-year flood plain," she said.

Jim Saccotelli said he stood in waist-deep water to get his horses out of the driveway.

"To have FEMA come and say 'You're not in a disaster area' is ridiculous," Saccotelli said, referring to the delay in granting individual aid programs to Thurston County.

Curtis DePuis, of the Chehalis Reservation in Oakville, challenged Swecker about the status of a plan to raise Interstate 5 so the Chehalis River can flow underneath. The freeway, which was closed for several days because of flooding, turned into a holding pond last week until a dike alongside it was breached.

"The flood map Lewis County uses is a 1982 flood map," DePuis said. "Before anything else happens, Lewis County should adopt a 2007 flood map."

Swecker said the state is considering a \$124 million plan that would include building large water-retention ponds and swales alongside the Chehalis River, a water-retention system at Skookumchuck Creek and opening out traditional flood areas much sooner so they can absorb more water. The plan, which would not include raising I-5, would be funded by a \$50 million state bond and federal money, he said.

Fraser and Swecker added they will review timber-cutting practices and seek to examine state construction grants to make sure new buildings do not put more water onto floodplain areas.

"Flood plains are beautiful, rich, fertile land, good for agriculture," Snyder said. "Really, nothing much else works on the flood plain."

At Tuesday's meeting, about 30 workers from several Thurston County departments, the Red Cross and the Rochester Organization of Families staffed information tables to offer one-on-one help to residents. The three county commissioners and their staff members recorded all of the residents' comments and listened to their concerns.

"Down here, you're almost the forgotten victims," Commissioner Diane Oberquell told the group. "We want to make sure you're not forgotten any longer."