



DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
NEW YORK DISTRICT, CORPS OF ENGINEERS
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ATTN: Stakeholders, Passaic River Basin, NJ

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The Pathway to Reducing Flood Risk in the Passaic River Basin

Dear Stakeholders in the Passaic River Basin:

The Corps of Engineers is partnering again with the state of New Jersey to examine and compare potential flood risk management solutions for communities in the Passaic River Basin. I know many people say they've heard it all before and don't want another study, but I want to be up front and explain where we are now, what we're doing and why.

There have been more than a few reports incorrectly portraying the nature of this study and I hope to offer some clarification. This latest study is what's called a reevaluation study, which means we'll be streamlining the process by updating the most recent study we completed in the 1980s. That means what we're doing now is not reinventing the wheel (we know why it floods, we know where it floods, etc.) – what we're doing now is examining different combinations of comprehensive flood risk management alternatives by utilizing decades of existing data to update the engineering done in the 1980s to compare the economic benefits of each alternative.

Also, because this is a reevaluation, we're comparing and analyzing just a handful of complex alternatives, rather than the more than 150 that were scrutinized in the 1980s study. This will give the State and public an opportunity to determine which alternatives to evaluate in the detailed analysis phase.

Now, let's take another look at why that 1980s study did not lead to the construction of any large-scale project for the basin. That study recommended a diversion tunnel project that would take flood waters to Newark Bay, but it was never constructed due to discord between local groups and leaders both in and outside of the basin. The Corps of Engineers cannot "lobby" for projects. Put simply, we study problems, recommend solutions and build what we are authorized and funded to build by Congress. The push for these projects, these solutions, must come from the communities, local leaders and elected officials.

Lack of public support and/or public consensus is a common theme for efforts to mitigate flooding in the basin. In fact, the Corps of Engineers has studied the chronic flooding issues in the Passaic River Basin and proposed flooding solutions in 1939, 1948, 1962, 1969, 1972, 1973, and most recently with the study from the 1980s being reevaluated. That's why people are tired of studies that don't result in projects, and I understand that. But the fact of the matter is the hardest part for any project is after the study when it's time for leaders and communities to work toward the implementation of a project. Everything from discord among groups with different interests to apathy (people never want to expend time and resources on flooding when it hasn't flooded in a while) have led to these studies being put on the shelf with their recommendations never built – which brings us to now, as we begin another study.

I want to emphasize, more than anything, the fact that the Corps of Engineers cannot act alone on a project of this magnitude. We need a collaborative effort—one that includes support from local elected town officials all the way to elected officials in Washington and everyone in between. That means towns within the basin that may have competing interests must work together as partners. Public officials must understand the process, especially if a project is authorized for construction, is a long one and that as my colleague New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Bob Martin said, “there is no silver bullet” that will magically stop flooding in the basin, especially not overnight. It takes initiative and grit to work collaboratively toward a complex solution that may not come to fruition until after your term in office is up, rather than sitting back and criticizing while waiting for a project to fail.

That’s not to say people can’t criticize what we’re doing or our processes, but there’s a difference between constructive criticism or having honest, hard discussions and producing sound-bites just to reinforce misconceptions about the work being done and what people can realistically expect as far as real, meaningful flood risk management solutions.

In my three years commanding the New York District of the Corps of Engineers I’ve toured every community throughout the Passaic River Basin. I’ve spoken with elected officials—both local and federal—and listened to the frustrated concerns of residents adversely affected by flooding. I have done my best to keep the ball rolling toward a solution, and I believe this study is a huge step in that direction.

I believe public support is vital to the success of a project of this magnitude and I understand people won’t blindly support something because they’re told to—nor should they. Support and trust needs to be earned through better understanding and more public outreach. That’s why the Corps of Engineers and our partners in the New Jersey DEP are striving to reach out to help explain this reevaluation study to the public and hopefully clear up some misconceptions regarding its intent. That is also why we’re holding, tonight in Pequannock Township High School, the first of what will be multiple public meetings throughout the process of this study. I’d like to thank those of you for attending tonight’s meeting and I encourage all residents of the Passaic River Basin looking to learn more about this study to come to future meetings with an open mind and to understand we are working on the first steps toward what will hopefully be a better future with reduced flood risks for communities in the Passaic River Basin.


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