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NEWS FROM THE PEQUANNOCK RIVER COALITION

PRC Responds to Flood Basin Plan

February 13, 2011 – Recently the Passaic River Basin Flood Advisory Committee issued recommendations to the NJDEP on the control of flooding in the Passaic River Watershed (http://www.state.nj.us/dep/newsrel/2011/11_0016.htm). In all, the report contained 15 points. Some we agree with and some we do not.

Obviously the purchase of flood-prone land as open space is a smart move, as is keeping development out of these areas. In addition, the removal of the Pompton Feeder Dams is a measure we have supported. In fact, PRC has championed this issue.

On the downside are suggestions for “Shoal Dredging”. These are stop-gap, band-aid measures that will accomplish more harm than good, proposed by people with little understanding of how rivers work. Removing shoals will do almost nothing to reduce flooding, and even careful dredging is very harmful to aquatic life. In some cases the shoals are the result of natural, healthy processes. In others, they are produced by manmade alterations, like the Feeder Dams. Either way, shoals are an effect rather than a cause. PRC will vigorously oppose dredging unless it is carefully thought out, planned by trained professionals, and executed as part of a larger scheme that addresses root causes.

Below is our detailed response to the report. Hopefully we can find sensible and permanent solutions to flooding problems without destroying our waterways.

Please contact us with any questions, comments or suggestions.

Thanks!

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February 11, 2011

Mr. Bob Martin, Commissioner
New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection
401 East State Street, 7th Floor, East Wing
Trenton, NJ 08625-0402

Dear Commissioner Martin,
I am writing to express the views of my organization on the published "Recommendations of the Passaic River Basin Flood Advisory Commission", issued in January of 2011.

First, we applaud the recommendations for flood-prone land buyouts (report recommendation #1—Floodway and Floodplain Buyouts). The "Blue Acres" program has been highly successful at reducing flood damage, as well as providing public access to our waterways. Moreover, this relief is permanent. We also support report recommendation #15 (Moratorium on All New Development within the Floodplain), for the same reasons.

However, my group is very concerned over recommendations for dredging or "shoal removal" as a flood mitigation measure, particularly for the Pequannock River (report recommendation #5—Desnagging and Shoal Dredging and recommendation #8— Permit Expedition for Desnagging and Shoal Dredging). We believe this approach addresses a symptom of the problem rather than the true cause, wastes valuable funding, and will do more harm than good. The formation of some shoals is natural in any river channel, created by natural processes. A river without a sequence of deep pools and shallow sections is an unhealthy waterway. Yet, shoals can accumulate in some areas for other reasons.

Based on our knowledge of the Pequannock River system, we know that the antiquated "feeder" dams on the Pompton River are great contributors to both local flooding and the formation of shoals. These dams have caused severe sedimentation and loss of prior flood storage capacity on nearby parts of the Pequannock River and Ramapo River by slowing the flow of water above the dams through this area.

The ability of a river to transport sediment is directly related to the speed of the river flow. The faster the flow, the more sediment can be transported by the water. Anything that reduces that speed, like these dams, will cause sediment to be deposited and excessive shoals to form. Removing the shoals without removing these dams will NOT eliminate the problem. In fact, the shoals will reform quickly in the same locations for the same reasons.

Removal of these dams is listed in the report as recommendation #6 (Feeder Dam Removals), and is an action we strongly support. If these dams were removed, river flows would accelerate and the sediment would be gradually flushed from the river, removing the shoals and creating additional flood storage during high water periods.

In addition to causing sediment deposits, we must also note that the main Pompton "feeder" Dam is more than 15 feet in height. Water upstream of the dam must rise well above the pre-existing bed of the river before it can pass over this dam.

A rise in water height at this point causes a rise in water levels far upstream due to the relatively slight land contours in this area. Of course, peripheral effects extend even farther upstream. Again, if the dams were removed, this backwater flooding effect would be eliminated.

In support of this position we can also point to the recent flood control project undertaken at the Pompton Lakes Dam a short distance upstream. According to the NJDEP:

“One of the primary causes of flooding within the project area was due to water backing up behind the Pompton Lakes Dam during high river flow. This caused developed areas at the upper end of the lake to be flooded on a frequent basis.” Clearly, the impacts of the Pompton Lakes Dam on upstream areas are no different than the ongoing impacts from the Pompton “feeder” dams. Although the Pompton Lakes Dam was retained to provide lakefront amenities and water supply storage, the feeder dams serve no such purpose.

The feeder dams on the Pompton also pose severe hazards for boaters. We have attempted to make boating on the river safer by posting warning signs, but the best way to make full use of the river’s recreational potential is to remove these dams.

Based on this, it is our recommendation that the feeder dams be removed before any shoal removal is done there, or even considered. With the dams removed, we believe natural processes will eliminate these shoals and reduce flooding without the need or expense of dredging. This will also result in environmental advantages, since dredging is a very harmful activity for aquatic life.

Should shoal removal be considered afterwards, a qualified expert in river hydraulics and morphology should make the determination that the shoal is not the result of a healthy natural process and needs to be removed. While the views of local residents have value, they lack the skill and training to make this determination. We would vigorously oppose inappropriate dredging.

We thank you for considering our input on this topic. Please contact us if we can provide any additional detail or if you wish to discuss these matters at greater length.

Sincerely,
Ross Kushner
Executive Director

cc: Assemblyman Scott Rumana , District 40
Mayor Kathleen Cole, Borough of Pompton Lakes
Mayor William Budenheim, Borough of Riverdale

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