

Another view: Finger-pointing is not answer to flood risks

By Layne Marceau -- Special To The Bee
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Hurricane Katrina served as a giant wake-up call for Californians.

Thousands, if not millions, of Californians are already living behind levees designed and built to protect them. This awakened recognition that California has a substantial flood risk has certain members of the Legislature taking steps that would not only stop desperately needed housing from being built but do absolutely nothing to protect the residents already living behind those levees. All paths to higher levels of flood protection in this state begin with fixing and better maintaining the levee system we have relied upon so heavily for almost 100 years.

California homebuilders support a thoughtful and comprehensive approach to flood protection, beginning with fixing the levees. Specifically a comprehensive plan should include:

- Conducting systemwide risk assessments of the state's levees;
- Appropriating necessary public funding to repair and fortify the levees;
- Establishing a program for ongoing maintenance of the levees;
- Increasing public awareness about flood risk;
- Increasing the availability and use of flood insurance;
- Ensuring that local governments have and utilize adequate land-use safeguards.

With the exception of the recently approved levee improvement bond measure -- which all Californians should cheer -- the Legislature has done little in the way of accomplishing these goals. Instead, several lawmakers are trying to promote the canard that limiting new housing or shifting flood safety liability from the state to local governments is the answer. That fantasy is reflected by bills such as Assembly Bill 1899 (by Assemblywoman Lois Wolk, D-Davis) and AB 3050 (by Assemblyman Dave Jones, D-Sacramento), which take direct aim at new housing.

AB 1899 would fence off thousands of acres of land already determined to be safe by the federal government. The bill sets an arbitrary flood standard of 200-year protection. And while we all believe more is desirable, the policy must be practical. AB 1899 would not work to do anything today because maps for 200-year levels of protection don't exist.

AB 3050 is just as bad and would serve only to prevent local governments from meeting its local housing needs. The bill says, "Even though we the state built and then forgot to maintain the levees, we think you local governments should be held responsible." That's not fair and that is not flood protection.

Finger-pointing and blaming housing is not an answer to the state's flood risk. Everyone should be working together to accomplish something that is meaningful and safe for California communities at risk. That initiative should begin today.

About the writer:

- Layne Marceau is chairman of the California Building Industry Association and California Major Builders Council. He is responding to the editorial "Up a creek," which appeared May 17.

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