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## Some doubt the effectiveness 3 Anti-flooding projects

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Water came rushing through the West Riser Tide Gates in Moonachie on a recent afternoon, and Nick Agnoli was not happy.

Something -- whether it was a rotted wooden gate or debris lodged in the sensitive system -- was allowing the rising tide in Berry's Creek to flow unimpeded.

Had this been a powerful northeaster, the gates could have failed completely, washing out the nearby Boylan's soda plant and other factories in the area.

"This doesn't seem to be salvageable," Agnoli, a storm water engineer, said of the 40-year-old gates.

North Jersey is rarely shaken by earthquakes. Wildfires are largely limited to the Meadowlands. And twisters are uncommon. Flooding, however, is a constant threat, causing millions of dollars in damage almost every year.

Three major anti-flooding projects that affect parts of Bergen, Passaic, Hudson and Morris counties are expected to begin this fall.

All have received praise from local officials, but some question their effectiveness.

The debate centers on whether North Jersey is continuing to rely on stop-gap measures that will help mitigate flooding in certain areas in lieu of a more comprehensive plan.

The three projects are:

- A flood buyout plan in Wayne. The town will use \$5.1 million recently received from the state and federal governments to buy and level dozens of flood-prone homes in the Passaic River Basin.
- The new Pompton Lake Dam. Two massive floodgates are scheduled to be operational by October to help control flooding along the Ramapo River in Oakland.
- Reconstructing the Rutherford Tide Gates. The Meadowlands Commission is scheduled to rebuild the badly deteriorated gates starting in October to prevent flooding along Route 17.

In Wayne, the buyout plan will focus on Hoffman Grove, a neighborhood of 122 summer cottages turned year-round residences along the Pompton River.

But even supporters of the plan, including Wayne Mayor Scott Rumana, Rep. Bill Pascrell Jr., D-Paterson and an Army Corps of Engineers official believe it will have minimal impact on the region.

"Yes, we're going to take our residents out of harm's way, but it doesn't deal globally with the issue," Rumana said. "Buyouts can only go so far. We could never afford to buy out Willowbrook Mall, but it sits right there. [Buyouts are] a piece in the puzzle, but we clearly know we need to do a lot more."

A comprehensive plan to cut flooding in the basin would cost billions, but would be more effective than town-by-town buyout plans, said Paul Tumminello, who has overseen a number of anti-flooding projects in North Jersey for the Army Corps of Engineers.

Such big-ticket projects include installing flood walls along the river banks, widening and deepening the river and building the much-maligned Passaic River flood tunnel.

The \$1.8 billion, 21-mile tunnel that would divert floodwaters to Newark Bay was authorized by Congress in 1990, but went nowhere after losing support of local and federal leaders.

Tumminello thinks it's still a viable option. "If we did the studies all over again, [the tunnel] may still be the best plan," he said.

Rumana, Pascrell and others established a regional task force last year to be more effective when lobbying the government for anti-flood funds. Fifteen towns joined last year, but the response since then has been lukewarm.

"We've got to get our own act together," Pascrell said. "The attendance is not very good. Many towns go unrepresented. They have to come together as a force. If the municipalities don't want to be a part of it, then they're going to have to deal with flooding for a long time."

The \$22 million Pompton Lake Dam is not designed to reduce regional flooding and will have no impact on the nearby Passaic River Basin, officials said.

It will instead mitigate flooding for only 350 homes in Oakland, Wayne and Pompton Lakes, said John O'Connor, the dam's project manager for the Army Corps of Engineers.

The dam is scheduled to go online in October after motors are installed this summer and the Army Corps tests the floodgates in September.

Below the Pompton Lake Dam, the Ramapo River merges with the Pequannock River to form the Pompton River. The Pompton merges with the Passaic River and adds to flooding problems downstream in the Willowbrook Mall area, Little Falls, West Paterson and Paterson.

"It doesn't improve things, and it doesn't make them worse," O'Connor said of downriver communities. "This mitigates flooding in a very specific area."

In the Meadowlands, a recent report showed that six of 34 tide gates did not work, including Rutherford, and nine others had problems.

The Meadowlands Commission would have to spend \$35 million to fix all the gates and carry out a flood management plan for the 14 Bergen and Hudson County towns that the commission covers.

The agency hopes to receive that money from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, but for now will concentrate on smaller projects like a \$2 million to \$4 million project to replace the Rutherford gates.

"We're trying to move away from the Band-Aid approach," said Robert Ceberio, executive director of the commission. "We're now looking at the entire district and what the needs are to stop flooding. The Band-Aid approach has often been left to the municipalities."

Bill Sheehan, head of the environmental group Hackensack Riverkeeper, said effective tide gates only help so much, especially with sea levels rising.

Sheehan said development in the Meadowlands must be curbed to make a difference.

"Just maintaining the status quo is not going to work when people are holding back the

sea," he said. "We engineer our way around [flooding] with tidal control structures when it should have been dealt with years ago when acres and acres of wetlands were filled in."

The shoddy Rutherford tide gates can be blamed almost every time the southern stretch of Route 17 floods.

Only one of the five gates is able to open and close. In addition, an adjacent drainage ditch that runs for 1½ miles is littered with debris and needs to be cleaned out.

Construction is expected to begin in October, with repairs slated to be completed by the spring of 2007.

"It will be a very radical change," said Agnoli, the commission's storm water engineer. "It will mean the water has a place to go."

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