

ParkNotes

A newsletter of the Friends of St. Paul and Ramsey County Parks
1621 Beechwood Avenue, St. Paul, Minnesota 55116 651- 698-4543
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Anatomy of a floodwall

Funding

The Friends have reported regularly on the floodwall being built to protect the Saint Paul Downtown Airport from flood waters of the Mississippi River. It is a story of community activism, flawed studies and ultimately a battle between the power of commerce vs. concerns for the environment. At the end of the day, the environment lost time and again. The floodwall will be completed in 2008. Before the details of this effort are lost in the mists of time, we wanted to document what we did, how we did it, and how we ultimately failed. For the first time ever this entire newsletter will be devoted to a single topic. Editors note

The story begins in 2002 when the Metropolitan Airports Commission, MAC, began their effort to erect a floodwall around the Saint Paul Downtown Airport, Holman Field to the old timers. Since the airport is located in the floodway, during periods of high water it was necessary to close the airport. The MAC proposed building an eight-foot high, one mile long dike made of metal sheet pile. Their goal was to keep out '100 year flood' water. Had the planned wall been built back in 1933 it would have protected the airport three times.

The cost of the flood was estimated to be \$9 million dollars. That cost would ultimately balloon to \$30 Million. Paying for it was the MAC's biggest concern and was the first point of leverage for citizens who opposed it's construction.

Mayor Randy Kelly sought to use \$1 million in city money and asked the State to appropriate an addition \$6 million for the project. The City Council did not appropriate the requested \$1 million and worked through the Saint Paul legislative delegation to oppose budgeting state money for the project. Ill will between the opposing sides was scarcely a secret. The Pioneer Press (3/16/05) reported that "Kelly threatened to ask Gov. Tim Pawlenty to veto all of the city's bonding request that year if the Saint Paul legislative delegation didn't fund the airport project." Kelly denied the threat but Pawlenty forced the legislature to include \$1 million for the project in the budget. The governor later shifted millions of dollars from the Minnesota Department of Transportation to fund the project and the MAC diverted funds earmarked to improve facilities and reduce delays at Minneapolis/St. Paul airport to complete the funding package.

Supporters and opponents

Supporters and opponents of the project read like a list of who's who of the business and environmental community, but with a couple of interesting twists. Supporters, in addition to the MAC included 3M, Hubbard Broadcasting and Travelers Insurance.

Opponents included the Friends of the Parks, Saint Paul Audubon Society, National Park Service, Sierra Club, Friends of the Mississippi, District 1 Community Council, WSCO and Dayton's Bluff Community Council, District 6 Community Council, and super activist Tom Dimond. Also in opposition were the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad, Canadian Pacific Railway, Union Pacific Railroad Company and Northwest Airlines. The railroad's opposition was because they feared that diking the river on one side might lead to increased flooding on the opposite side of the river, where their tracks have run for over a hundred years. The prospect of needing to dike the river on both sides if it is diked on one side is a very real.

Economic issues

The MAC pursued the dike because they claimed great economic harm would be done unless the floodwall was built. To bolster their position, they completed a Benefit Cost Analysis, BCA. Their BCA was based on an anticipated frequency of nine floods while over the same period historically there had been only three floods. They based their assumption on predictions which they attributed to the National Weather Service predicting triple the frequency of floods. The Weather Service denies that they have made such a prediction, but the BCA continued to use the nine flood events as the underlying basis for the final report.

Critics found other flaws in the Benefit Cost Analysis.

- * It based the analysis on the original estimated cost of \$9 million, not the actual cost of \$30 million

- * Included results from a *Survey of Airport Tenants, 2001 flood losses of airport tenants actual 2001 flood losses*. This listed 3M as having \$1 million in damages and other costs while photos of the 2001 flood show that the 3M facility was not flooded.

- * Included results from the *Survey* that included \$265,000 in damages to a building at 300 Airport Road that had not yet been built in 2001.

- * Included costs of passengers driving back and forth between a theoretically flooded Downtown Airport and Minneapolis/St. Paul Airport. The assumption seems to have been that thousands of unknowing flyers would drive to the submerged Downtown Airport, discover it was flooded then drive to MSP.

Who owns the land

The MAC's floodwall plans hit what appeared to be a major snag when it was discovered by citizens that they planned to dredge land owned by the Saint Paul Port Authority. This impediment was discovered as they began filing for permits, only to discover that their project involved the neighbor's land. This problem was quickly, 'tho not without some embarrassment, solved when the Port Authority granted them permission to use their property for the dike.

Through the Planning Commission and the Council

The election of 2005 removed one of the strongest supporters from the mix, Mayor Randy Kelly. Replaced by Chris Coleman, Coleman signaled he would not accept a project that was not consistent with the Mississippi River Corridor Plan of the Saint Paul Comprehensive Plan. Despite the Mayor's reservations, the Planning Commission approved the variances needed so the floodwall could be constructed. The Friends and fellow travelers appealed the Planning Commission decision to the City Council which ruled in favor of the Friends.

Coleman announced the floodwall's appearance was the most critical issue saying, "We cannot allow the MAC to put lipstick on a sheet-metal pig and call it a compromise." He offered to negotiate with the MAC and issued a list of conditions for the variance and site plan to be approved.

- 1) Aesthetic issues regarding the design, appearance and location of the floodwall and the compensatory excavation sites must be addresses
- 2) The floodwall must be located as far as possible from the riverbank
- 3) The MAC must work to secure the Federal Aviation Agency's approval to minimize the public's exposure to noise and safety hazards from airport operations and establish funding for noise abatement for homes near the airport.

The compromise

As if things were not complicated enough, it got more complicated as the Saint Paul Riverfront Corporation led the effort to change the project to meet the Mayor's demands. They recommended: increased public access around the airport; connect the trail system around the airport to South Saint Paul; change some of the sheet metal material for the wall to decorative concrete; improve the vegetative plan;

The sewer line

move the Bayfield Street section of the floodwall as far from the river's edge as possible.

The MAC resubmitted their request for variances and the site plan to the Planning Commission which again granted the variances and approved the site plan. To the Friends, the new request looked a lot like the old request. With a sense of deja vu, the Friends appealed the matter to the City Council.

Councilpresident Kathy Lantry showed her frustration when she said the minor modifications to the design and appearance of the floodwall were "merely a different shade of lipstick on the same pig." But this time the votes were not there and the Council voted 4-3 to approve the variances and the site plan. All that lay ahead was construction. But if anything had become clear during the preceding years, it was that what was written and what would happen were not necessarily the same thing. With construction brought new environmental nightmares and a continuation of the old conflicts.

MAC contractors set right to work, carefully flagging their construction area with day-glow flags. Then plowed over the wetland area and cleared all of the vegetation and trees from the riverbank, all outside the allowed construction area. They installed a drainage sewer in the wrong location, ultimately requiring that the sheet metal dike be moved up to thirty feet closer to the river, thus making it more intrusive. Tom Dimond observed the work going on outside the allowed construction zone and alerted City officials to the problem. In October, 2006 the City ordered MAC to halt construction at the airport because they had not gotten proper approval for the project. In lay terms, as Jacob Dorer from Dayton's Bluff put it, the City did not step in earlier to prevent the clear cutting and the placement of the sewer line because, "...the MAC did not even pull a permit for their work. ... No Permit! It is unbelievable that a multi-mullion dollar project would not file permits, and would claim that they didn't realize they needed one, or know that they were working outside the boundaries of their day-glow-flagged work area."

Belatedly MAC applied for the permits in February, 2007 when they again went before the Planning Commission for approvals. Because of the improperly placed sewer line, they needed to get a variance. Predictably the Planning Commission approved the variance, the Friends appealed the Commission action and again it went before the City Council. Mayor Coleman, seemingly regretful that mistakes had been made, nonetheless felt it would be wrong to use public money (MAC money) to relocate the sewer line to it's proper location. The City Council granted the appeal but Mayor Coleman supported the Planning Commission recommendation and vetoed the Council's action.

But the trips to the City Council on appeals of Planning Commission recommendations were not done. There was still the issue of the re-vegetation plan.

Vegetation

MAC was required to have a vegetation plan approved by the city. When the city council approved the floodwall they attached conditions including:

- * The flood wall needed to be located not more than six feet from the edge of the river side of Bayfield Street;
- * Vegetation on the riverside would be retained;
- * Trees and vegetation would be planted on the boulevard along Bayfield Street;
- * Public access to the river would be provided;

* MAC would restore the old stone harbor stairway.

With the improper sewer line location and the clear cutting of vegetation MAC was already in violation of the agreement, but it was hoped that their vegetation plan would attempt to remedy some of the problems. They submitted their plan to the Planning Commission in June, 2007. The plan showed no tree plantings along Bayfield and they planned to replace the stone harbor stairway with concrete steps, not restore the granite and limestone steps. This plan was approved by the Planning commission. Surprise! Tom Dimond appealed the decision to the City Council.

When the appeal came before the Council, long time supporter Dave Thune was out ill. There were not enough votes to lay the appeal over until it could be heard by a full council. The appeal was defeated and in the end the Council approved the MAC vegetation plan with conditions:

- 1) The stairway to the harbor will be restored in a manner consistent with the development of public access to the harbor and wetland area by January 1, 2010;
- 2) All areas disturbed by construction of the floodwall and storm-sewer must be re-vegetated;
- 3) MAC shall provide and maintain a 20ft. wide landscaped strip along the inside of the floodwall;
- 4) Increase by 25% the original landscaping budget for the floodwall to cover the additional costs for re-vegetation;
- 5) MAC shall submit to city staff all invoices for landscaping and re-vegetation;
- 6) If invoices do not reach \$375,000 by January 1, 2009, the remaining amount shall be placed in escrow for future maintenance of the landscaping in the immediate area of the floodwall and sewer project along Bayfield.

Vast amounts of volunteer energy have gone into a sometimes failed effort to protect the river and the surrounding environment. The Friends and others mourn what has been lost. Time (and tide) will tell what the long term impact of the floodwall and the efforts to mitigate its impact will really have.

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