

Favored flood center site has safety issues

By MATT WEISER
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A plan to build a new center to manage weather and water emergencies in the Sacramento region has prompted concern because the preferred location could be wiped out by an emergency at Folsom Dam.

The so-called Joint Operations Center, currently on El Camino Avenue in Sacramento, brings together three agencies involved in predicting severe weather and managing dams in the region. One of its chief functions is to prevent flooding.

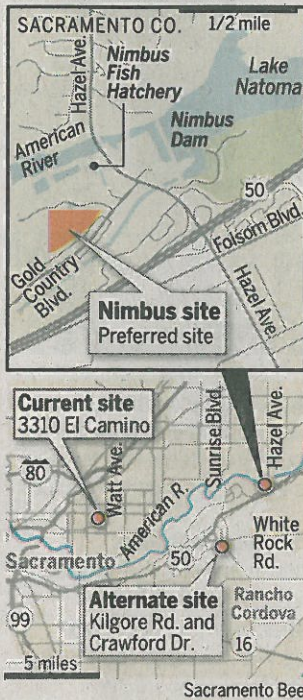
For 15 years, the center has operated in a leased building that is shared by the California Department of Water Resources, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and National Weather Service. The agencies jointly juggle the challenges that Pacific storms impose on Central California's vast network of dams and flood channels.

The current building, a former department store in a strip mall, is cramped, can't be easily expanded and has security limitations.

So the agencies, led by Reclamation, identified two sites for a new building, which they hope to occupy by June 2015.

The preferred site is on federal land in the American River channel, adjacent to the Nimbus Fish Hatchery, near Hazel Avenue, eight miles downstream of the dam.

SITES FOR EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTER



PUBLIC MEETINGS

What: Public informational meetings on the proposed new Joint Operations Center

When: 2 to 4 p.m., and 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. today

Where: Sacramento State Aquatics Center, 1901 Hazel Ave., Gold River. Comments may also be submitted in writing by Feb. 16.

For information:
www.usbr.gov/mp/cvo/joc.html

Design requirements state the location must be above the 200-year floodplain. An information sheet on the project says the Nimbus site is above the 500-year floodplain.

If Folsom Dam failed, releasing nearly 1 million acre-feet of water in an instant because of an earthquake, terrorist attack or mechanical failure - the sort of worst-case event the center is supposed to anticipate - the area around the hatchery would likely be destroyed, said Robert Baruffaldi, Western Region chairman of the National Weather Service Employees Organization, a labor union representing about 40 people at the center.

"When emergencies happen, that's when we're needed the most," said Baruffaldi, a senior meteorologist who works at the center. "And they turn around and say, let's go and build this really expensive facility along the American River, right below Folsom Dam. It just doesn't make any sense to me whatsoever."

Pete Lucero, spokesman for the Bureau of Reclamation, said catastrophic risks will be weighed in an environmental study now beginning.

"Wherever they decide to build this thing, it has got to

meet certain standards with regard to flooding," Lucero said. "Everything will be on the table."

However, Dan Keeton, meteorologist in charge of the National Weather Service office in Sacramento, who also works at the center, downplayed the potential for a dam failure.

"A dam failure is not, from the standpoint of planning for something like this, a credible event," Keeton said. "We have to cope with a small amount of risk, and as long as that risk is very small and manageable, then it's acceptable."

The 16-acre Nimbus site is preferred because it is already federally owned, potentially saving several million dollars. No cost estimate for the project was available.

The project calls for 200,000 square feet of office space to house 500 people and several specialized control rooms. The final design could be a single three-story building, or a "campus" of as many as three smaller buildings.

A key criterion, for security reasons, is the ability to control public access to the facility in a 100-foot perimeter.

In 2007, planners looked at government buildings in the area that might be available, but found none suitable.

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