



Get flood answers

Tuesday, April 19, 2005

Public deserves to be told the reasons for two disasters in less than a year. When people are left homeless and businesses close or teeter on the brink of collapse twice in less than a year because of floodwaters, they deserve answers. And they are entitled to good-faith efforts to try to prevent it from happening again. In New Jersey, state Sen. Leonard Lance and acting Gov. Richard Codey are leading the charges. After September's jaw-dropper of a flood, Lance, R-Warren and Hunterdon, asked New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Bradley Campbell for a close examination of flood control measures. He has renewed his efforts following this month's flooding disaster. Campbell, an alternate member of the Delaware River Basin Commission, is in a position to get to the bottom of this mess.

And, on Monday, Codey, a Democrat, announced the formation of a task force to study the recent flooding problems and to establish plans and procedures to reduce flooding in the Garden State. Its members include Phillipsburg Mayor Harry Wyant, Lambertville Mayor David DeVecchio and Frenchtown Planning Board member Jeff Scott.

So far, there has been no word about similar efforts or task forces on the Pennsylvania side of the river. But it's never too late to start or make overtures about creating a bi-state task force to broaden the scope of this study.

Lance – and others – have been asking whether it was prudent for reservoirs upstream of the Lehigh Valley and northwestern New Jersey to release billions of gallons of water at the height of flooding problems in our area. Could they have seen it coming? Could they have released the water earlier? In smaller amounts over a longer period of time? Those are just some of the questions flood victims have been asking.

Other lawmakers from Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Washington, D.C., should be asking similar tough questions – and demanding answers.

We need to know whether poor choices made upstream on the Delaware helped exacerbate flooding in our area. We owe it to flood victims to try to determine whether the frenzy of local development has created too many parking lots, roadways, sidewalks and other impervious surfaces that storm-water runoff has no choice but to spill into our rivers, streams and creeks at unacceptable levels.

Those responsible for making water release decisions upstream insist the network of dams and reservoirs helped reduce flooding problems downstream. But many flood victims are skeptical and wonder whether they are getting an objective evaluation of exactly what happened. And why. And whether it could have been done differently.

This task force must find the answers and, if possible, solutions to help ease our flooding problems.

As far as flooding problems are concerned, New Jerseyans have enough to worry about without adding federal government inaction to the list.

In September, it took two days for President Bush to declare flood-ravaged areas of Pennsylvania as federal disaster areas and two weeks to do the same for New Jersey.

Now it seems to be déjà vu all over again. Flood-damaged counties in the Keystone State are already eligible for federal money; victims in the Garden State are still waiting.

This is an outrage that the Bush administration must make right as quickly as possible.

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