



Newport Mayor Dean Sawyer points to some of the houses along NE Harney Street that would be "taken out" should Big Creek dams fail. (Photos by Cheri Brubaker)

Mayor says upgrade to Big Creek dams critical

BY CHERI BRUBAKER
Of the News-Times

NEWPORT — "We started every morning at eight and ended every evening at eight," said Newport Mayor Dean Sawyer of his three-day trip in November to Washington, D.C., where he lobbied for federal funds for a new dam to replace the eroding Big Creek dams.

"It was boom, boom, boom, boom, boom," he said of the relentless pace of the three days he met with politicians and their staff to make a case for Newport's water source.

Sawyer bluntly said of Newport's Big Creek dams, "A 3.5 earthquake

will take it out."

"We're in what the state classifies as 'advanced seepage' right now," he added. "It means the seepage is getting worse. The dams could go just because of seepage alone. You don't have to have an earthquake."

Newport Public Works Director Tim Gross showed the News-Times exactly where and explained how the dam is failing.

DAMS on Page A5

Evidence of seepage and erosion is readily apparent in the overflow culvert at the Big Creek dams.





Newport Public Works Director Tim Gross indicates the site of the proposed new dam that would replace the existing high-hazard dams at Big Creek dams. (Photo by Cheri Brubaker)

DAMS

Continued from page 1

"The reason there's a hole here," Gross said, pointing to one of many holes in the overflow culvert, "that means there's internal erosion back in there. The water is carrying material out, and that's what causes dam failure."

Gross explained that the city considered repairing the culvert, blocking the holes, but he fears the pressure would just cause additional seepage elsewhere.

"You can see how much water comes through some of these holes. Last year, this one was shooting two feet up in the air," said Gross of a small stream of water bubbling up through the bottom of the deteriorating culvert.

Should the dams fail, "It would take out about 20 homes downstream," Sawyer said of the houses on Northeast Harney Street that lie in the water's path, "and those people would have no warning whatsoever. It would also take out Highway 101 right there by the Best Western. That's where Big Creek comes out, and then it goes into the ocean there at Agate Beach Wayside. It would take out Oceanview Drive, as well.

Sawyer continued, "That's a deep cavern there, and that's where 101 goes across. It would take forever to rebuild 101."

And there are no alternative routes. "It would disrupt traffic north and south for a long period of time. Commercial traffic would be really hurt," he said.

The Big Creek dams were originally built in 1958. "Even then, they cut corners because they didn't have enough money. Once you start digging in the ground, you find things you didn't know about, and it costs more money, so you have to make cuts somewhere," said Sawyer.

According to the mayor, the current estimates to build a new dam are between \$70 and \$80 million, and it would take six to eight years to build if started today, due to permitting and environmental processes.

Sawyer said the impact beyond the Newport community was part of the message he took to the politicians in Washington, D.C., and what he wants coastal residents to be aware of.

"I think we were successful in getting our point across to our congressional delegation ... and other senators and congressmen, the infrastruc-

ture committee, including Peter DeFazio (U.S. Representative, D-OR)," said Sawyer.

High-hazard dams have been identified across the country, he added. "It's aging infrastructure. Everyplace in the country has this problem.

"We're a community of 10,000, but it's a regional hub," Sawyer said. "We have five to six thousand people a day commute here for jobs. We have 2.5 million tourists come here every year."

An important message Sawyer took to Washington was the economic value of Newport's water source, what is at risk.

"We have NOAA, the marine operations center ... Rogue Ales is headquartered here ... the Oregon Coast Aquarium ... we have Oregon State University Marine Science Center... the hospital... [and] of course, the fishing fleet uses a lot of water," Sawyer said, citing just some of the important institutions, employers and industries that rely on water from the Big Creek Reservoir.

"We estimate in five years the economic viability of our town is \$2.5 billion," Sawyer said confidently.

If you don't have water, what happens to your community, he

asked, before answering his own question. "This town would just dry up."

Sawyer reported that Newport's financial director estimates a \$70 million bond would cost the average taxpayer an additional \$1,000.

"Our community can't afford it, said Sawyer.

He noted the city's \$9 million pool bond passed on the second attempt by only 64 votes.

"We have to pay for the pool bond, the school bond, the international terminal bond and now the new hospital bond," Sawyer said, "So you add all that up, and it keeps creeping your tax bill up."

In addition to creating awareness in Congress, Sawyer wants the community to understand the risk imposed by the aging dams. The city has created an awareness campaign, and citizens can learn more about the issue by going online at SaveOurSupplyNewport.com.

ENGLERT
LeafC

*Guaranteed not to clog for as l

