

## As flood walls age, Kittanning and other towns must find money to make repairs

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By Mike Bucsko, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

KITTANNING -- There are more than a dozen sets of steps of every shape and fashion that provide access to the Allegheny River along a three-quarter-mile-long concrete flood wall at the north end of this Armstrong County town.

The river side of the flood wall is dotted with various structures that range from simple shelters with picnic benches to more sophisticated outdoor venues with electricity, outhouses, decks and docks. People use the facilities for access for fishing, boating and other recreational activities.

For years, residents of Kittanning, Ford City and other communities along the river have built the river huts and access stairs along, over and adjacent to the flood wall without regulation or interference from government agencies. But that is about to end.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has determined the condition of the Kittanning flood wall, built in 1940 in response to the devastation of the 1936 flood, is "unacceptable." It is one of three such structures in Western Pennsylvania rated as unacceptable as part a nationwide survey to determine the safety of levees in the post-Hurricane Katrina world.

The other two levees that are in danger are in Oil City, Venango County, and Vintondale, Cambria County.

Though the problems with the levees are different at each location, the underlying issue is the same -- if the local communities do not find ways to address the problems, there will be no federal or state aid available to repair the levees in the event of a flood.

The structures -- called a flood wall in Kittanning and dikes in Oil City and Vintondale -- were designed by the Corps of Engineers and built with a combination of federal, state and local money. As part of the construction agreements, the levees were turned over to the local municipalities to repair and maintain.

At nearly 67 years old, the Kittanning flood wall is the oldest. The Oil City Dike was built in 1958 and the Vintondale dike was



Andy Starnes , Post-Gazette

**Chris Sporer, city engineer for Oil City in Venango County, stands on a low section of the Oil Creek Dike, slated for repair this spring.**

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completed 30 years ago.

The Corps of Engineers has conducted regular inspections on the levees for more than 20 years, but last year was the first time the data from the inspection reports was compiled in a national report that included about 2,000 levees. The report found 122 of the 2,000 levees were unacceptable and in danger of failing.

### Improvements create problems

Vintondale's earthen dike, built after a 1977 flood in the tiny former coal mining community on the Cambria-Indiana County border, was labeled as unacceptable three years ago after inspectors from the state Department of Environmental Protection found water and sewer manholes had been built at the south end of the dike. The DEP notified the Corps of Engineers and a subsequent inspection found other problems as well, including uncontrolled vegetation that impeded channel flow and erosion along the dike's bank from all-terrain vehicles.

The water and sewer manholes were installed in 2004 as part of an improvement project for a substation by the Blacklick Valley Municipal Authority, said authority manager Michael Pisarcik. At the time, the installation of the manholes was not thought to be a problem, but the authority addressed the issue as soon as it received the DEP notification, Mr. Pisarcik said.

Still, it took nearly three years for the authority to obtain the proper permits from DEP to remove the manholes from the dike, mainly because Vintondale had failed to file a flood plan with the state, Mr. Pisarcik said. The work cost the authority an extra \$20,000 and was done in November, he said.

But Vintondale has yet to address the vegetation and erosion problems. The community of about 494 residents plans to spray the banks of the dike this spring along the South Branch of Blacklick Creek, borough secretary Donald Kereskes said. The dike is on the opposite bank of the creek from the Ghost Town Trail and the Eliza Furnace, an old iron blast furnace that operated from 1846 to 1849.

### State permits delay repairs

The problems with the Oil City Dike, as it is known locally, stem from the replacement of a bridge over Oil Creek 10 years ago by the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, said Chris Sporer, Oil City's engineer. The contractor that did the work used the dike as a staging area during the construction and removed some fill that cut off about two feet from the height of the earthen dike, Ms. Sporer said.

The 800-foot-long Oil City Dike runs between two bridges and was built to prevent flooding in a former residential area near the center of Oil City, Ms. Sporer said. The area, now mostly commercial, has not flooded since the dike was built 49 years ago, she said.

Oil City planned to repair the dike after it received notification of the unacceptable rating last

### Failing levees

Of the 122 levees nationwide in danger of failing, three are in western Pennsylvania.



Source: Corps of Engineers

year from the Corps of Engineers, Ms. Sporer said. But complications occurred when the dike turned up on the list of 122 unacceptable levees nationwide earlier this year and the DEP got involved and told the city permits would be required, she said.

However, Oil City has worked out a deal with PennDOT to provide the fill for the project and Oil City will provide part of the labor so it can be done in the next few months, provided the permitting process goes well with the DEP, Ms. Sporer said.

"My understanding is they will turn it around pretty quickly," she said.

### **Personal structures in the way**

Kittanning received its unacceptable notification two months ago. In addition to the various structures around the flood wall that will need to be altered or removed, the Corps of Engineers also said the borough must repair several sections of the concrete on top of the flood wall that has deteriorated and restore sections where the wall is sinking.

The flood wall stretches from just south of Dam No. 7 and north along Water Street, from Rebecca to Ewing streets. The area that is sinking is adjacent to Jud Field, while several other sections of the flood wall nearby have huge gaps from deterioration.

The borough council addressed the issue soon after it received the notification from the Corps of Engineers, council President Jerry Shuster said. Council members met with other local officials, the Corps of Engineers and citizens to discuss the right way to resolve the problem, particularly since the river access along the flood wall is very important to the residents, he said.

Many local officials, including Armstrong County Sheriff Larry Crawford, have docks and other structures along the riverbank that are accessible from the flood wall. Kittanning will for the first time have to map out the area and take stock of the property, structures and the people who use them and determine how the use and property ownership jibes with borough ordinances. Mr. Shuster said.

"People have done a great job clearing the land [along the river]," said Mr. Shuster, a professor of political communication at the University of Pittsburgh. "They take pride in making sure that it's rather well-maintained."

The numerous wooden and metal steps that have been built over many years will have to be removed and replaced by probably two or three main access points. By federal regulation, the steps cannot touch the flood wall as they do now and they will have to be built to provide access for flood wall repairs.

The shelters, decks and other structures along the flood wall will also have to be removed or altered to comply with a requirement that they be at least 10 feet away from the flood wall.

In some ways, that might be the easy part. The borough will have to find the resources -- hopefully with federal or state help -- to repair the damage to the flood wall, Mr. Shuster said. That part of the rehabilitation plan will likely take several years and be expensive, though the borough has not yet calculated the cost, he said. But the work must be done.

"I don't want to be sitting in council and have people say, 'You guys could have done something and you didn't, now we're all suffering,'" Mr. Shuster said.

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