

# Levee celebration in Sutter County

By Griffin Rogers Appeal-Democrat

A groundbreaking near the site of the 1955 levee failure that resulted in 38 deaths kicked off on Wednesday for what could be the most important construction project in Sutter County's history.

Congressmen, state leaders, local officials and community members gathered on Second Street to celebrate the beginning of a long-awaited project: The \$270 million repair of the west Feather River levee.

The project consists of repairing 41 miles of levee from the Sutter Bypass to the Thermalito Afterbay in Butte County. It is expected to increase public safety, save property owners millions of dollars on mandatory flood insurance, allow cities and counties the flexibility to implement General Plans and grow the economy.

"This day represents many things for us," said James Gallagher, chairman of the Sutter Butte Flood Control Agency. "First of all, it represents the beginning of a project that will be so vital to our communities in Sutter and Butte counties. Our cities, our small towns, businesses, farms, ranches, our families — their safety and prosperity will be better secured as a result of this project."

About 200 people attended the groundbreaking, including Congressmen John Garamendi, D-Walnut Grove, Doug LaMalfa, R-Richvale, state Sen. Jim Nielsen, R-Gerber, and a representative for Assemblyman Dan Logue, R-Loma Rica.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has only given the go-ahead to work on one mile of levee at Shanghai Bend. However, the corps should finish its review on the rest of the project by the end of the month, said Lee Bass, who represented the corps at Wednesday's event

The initial construction — to be completed in 2015 — calls for the repair of 15 miles of levee, starting in Yuba City. That portion costs about \$88 million, with \$57 million being paid for by the California Department of Water Resources using Proposition 1E bond funds. The remaining cost is funded through local assessments approved by property owners in 2010.

Assessment revenues, according to the Sutter Butte Flood Control Agency, are also partially funding another 20 miles of levee reconstruction in 2014.

At the groundbreaking, Mike Inamine, executive director of the Sutter Butte Flood Control Agency, said the large-scale project is an unprecedented milestone in inter-agency collaboration, but there's still work to be done.

"We have a long ways to go," he said. "This is just the beginning, but this community has achieved remarkable and unprecedented success just to get to this point,

and we are confident we will get to the finish line."

Garamendi praised Yuba-Sutter for its ability to get the project moving. "This community, the Sutter and Butte community, has really stepped up," he said. "You stepped up and you said, 'We're going to take care of ourselves.' (You) put in an assessment district, taxed yourself, to save yourself."

Garamendi and LaMalfa have played pivotal roles in the project's progression, officials said. Both urged the corps to expedite the process for permit approval so work could start this year.

## **Survivors**

For former Sutter County Supervisor Larry Montna, living through one Sutter County flood was enough.

Montna, a Yuba City resident, remembers when the Shanghai Bend levee broke in the 1955 flood, killing 38 people.

"When the water was coming at us," he said, "it wasn't like a wedge. It was like a pipe rolling at us."

Water dragged dirt and brush from the fields into town, Montna recalled. "I don't want to experience that again."

Like Montna, Dee Worledge attended the groundbreaking. She also witnessed the destructive 1955 flood.

"The water was lapping on the back wheels of our car," Worledge said.

Water filled up her home, she said. She found her family's piano floating upside down.

"I just remember the devastation," Worledge said. To this day, she is still afraid of water.

## **Garamendi on flood insurance reform**

The levee improvement project is expected to save some property owners millions of dollars each year in mandatory flood insurance costs, but others face huge hikes in the face of federal legislation.

The increase would result from the Biggert-Waters Flood Insurance Reform Act of 2012, which the Federal Emergency Management Agency says phases out some artificially low rates and discounts that are no longer sustainable.

It would affect nearly 5,000 parcels in unincorporated parts of Sutter County and cost those property owners an additional \$2.6 million annually.

Garamendi said the reform act will likely receive changes before it goes into ef-

fect. A bill is moving through Congress would delay the elimination of flood insurance subsidies, he said.

The impact of the Biggert-Waters Act "is a big deal," Garamendi said. "This is a big deal in Yuba and Sutter counties. It's a big deal in Sacramento County. It's a big deal where I live because my levees have also been downgraded and I am now the unhappy purchaser of very, very expensive flood insurance."

Area representatives are also looking at the Biggert-Waters Act as an opportunity to change laws for agriculture flood zones being hit with high insurance rates.

"We are now putting that back in play," Garamendi said. "And that will be very, very important for this entire Sacramento and San Joaquin Valley region, so that those areas that have previously been under the regime of less than 100-year flood protection will be able to move forward with agricultural projects – for farm buildings of various kinds. That's not the case today, and it creates a very serious problem for the agriculture industry."