

The Burlington Journal

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Editorial: Avon By-Pass... Boon or Boondoggle?

Across our desk a few days ago came a booklet entitled "Informational Bulletin, Skagit River, Washington-Plans for Flood Control and Recreation Improvements, Including Fisheries as added purposes for Avon By-Pass." The booklet was issued by the Corps if U.S. Army Engineers who have scheduled a public hearing at the Elks Lodge in Mount Vernon, Friday, November 22 at 1:30 p.m. on proposed improvements for the river.

From what we have seen and read, to date, we are unable to determine whether the misnamed Avon By-Pass would be a bonafide boon to our area or just another bureaucratic boondoggle. According to a recent release by Congressman Jack Westland the Corps is considering construction of the by-pass, strengthening of levees and building of a water storage facility as parts of a long-range flood control plan for the Skagit. The informational bulletin makes it plain that the bypass project itself is not intended to be up for discussion at the Nov. 22 hearing. A plan of "uniforming" the Skagit river levee system from Mount Vernon in combination with minor channel widening, and the addition of recreations and fisheries as added purposes to the Avon By-Pass will be the subjects that will be discussed, We do not know if this means the Corps has already been "sold" on the by-pass or not.

At any rate, we did not know the Corps was in the business of "selling"

anything. We always thought their function was to take over when a need was expressed, justification determined, and funds provided. Maybe it wasn't intended that way, but the informational bulletin mentioned above strikes us as a first class promotional piece as far as the recreation and fisheries aspects of the by-pass are concerned. We are presented with sketches of ducklings in the rushes, fishermen netting fish out of a boat, canoeing, bird and duck hunters prowling in the banks, beach balls and beach scenes, picnickers and even overnight campers in tents.

The Avon By-Pass project would create about 340 acres of water surface and 440 acres of adjacent land available to the public for recreational pursuits. It would create a lake about 8 miles long. The U.W. Fish and Wildlife Service and Washington Department of Game have developed plans for a resident trout fisher within the by-pass. The wildlife service estimates its usage at 159,000 fisherman days annually if the program were established. As the by-pass lies within the Pacific Flyway for migratory waterfowl hunting areas, increase usage by 6,760 hunter-days annually. The State Department of Game has proposed stocking the right of way with pheasants which would provide an additional 2,500 hunter-days annually. The State Parks and Recreation Commission and Skagit County are studying the possibility of developing the project's potential for all-purpose recreation. It is estimated that

the by-pass would initially attract about 60,000 persons annually, a figure that could “well reach 750,000 within 50 years.”

Now we don't like the idea of floods any more than anybody else. And we see nothing wrong with the idea of a uniform levee system, strengthening of the weak sections, or channel widening when necessary. The Corps estimates this job would cost about \$6,500,000 and would provide a levee system capable of withstanding flows of 120,000 cubic feet per second with at least two feet of freeboard. Cost of local cooperation requirements for the necessary levee and channel improvements are approximated at \$370,000. Again we say, on the basis of what good judgment we can muster, we have no quarrel with this proposal.

But the by-pass is something else. With the levee improvements cited, and the addition of the by-pass, the engineers say we would be able to control flows of up to 180,000 c.f.s. from Burlington downstream, and would increase the level of flood protection in presently diked areas to 30-year frequency. Under this plan, the river would carry 120,000 c.f.s. and the by-pass 60,000. Cost of the by-pass was last estimated at \$19,000,000 with the Federal government paying \$15 million of the cost. If we felt construction of the by-pass, in conjunction with levee and channel improvements would end Skagit floods for all time we might find it easier to warm up the project. The fact remains, however, that the river has exceeded 180,000 c.f.s. five times in its recorded history – 185,000 in Nov. 1896, 190,000 in November 1897, 220,000 in November 1906, 195,000 in December 1917, and 210,000 in December 1921. We're certainly no experts on rivers but it's reasonable to

presume these excessive flows could occur again under the right circumstances. If they did, we would all get our feet wet, by-pass or no by-pass.

On the other hand there have been no disastrous floods in the lower Skagit Valley since the completion of the Ross Dam in 1949. During flood periods, the Ross Plant has been shut down, sometimes entirely, to hold back the greatest possible amount of water. In 1949, from Thursday midnight until Sunday midnight, enough water was held behind the dam to cover 116,000 acres of land to a depth of one foot. At the crest of the flood approximately 50,000 cubic feet of water was impounded every second. Although the dam was built primarily for power production, it had appreciably reduced the flood threat in the lower Skagit.

The potential of the recreation and fishing and hunting aspects of the by-pass cited by the Wildlife Service, frankly, scares the hell out of us. We have visions of thousands of metropolitan hunters and fishermen tramping our fields and making a shooting gallery out of the floor of our valley during duck and peasant seasons. At the same time the whole concept of a man-made recreational playground here in the Skagit seems somewhat ludicrous, Nature has already provided us with an outdoor sportsman's paradise and a recreational haven for all the family that is the envy of millions of people. Somehow we can't help but believe it would stack up as a petty effort with the backdrop of the Cascades at one of the Puget Sound at the other.

We are not convinced either that the by-pass would tend to impair the free flow of people and traffic across the valley. This barrier could work a hardship on business, industry and

agriculture. From a strictly selfish viewpoint we can see the City of Burlington and surrounding area locked in by the river on one side and the artificial moat on the other. It would appear that the Burlington Cut-Off would be a more appropriate name for the project than the Avon By-Pass. Before this thing blossoms into reality sufficient thought should be given to the possible consequences.