

Bonding bill falls short of funding needs for northwest Minnesota flood control projects

Without adequate funding, the project to remove part of Newfolden from the 100-year floodplain will remain in limbo.

By Brad Dokken May 17, 2023



A construction crew works on a project to replace a series of culverts on a railroad crossing over the Middle River with a bridge near Newfolden, Minnesota, in the winter of 2023. The work marks the first component of a flood control project to remove part of the city of Newfolden from the 100-year floodplain. The second component of the project requires funding from the Minnesota Legislature before work can begin.

Contributed/Morteza Maher

NEWFOLDEN, Minn. — With the clock ticking on the 2023 session of the Minnesota Legislature and the May 22 adjournment deadline, local concern is mounting that a

massive infrastructure bill doesn't include adequate funding for local flood control projects in Newfolden and elsewhere in northwest Minnesota.

Funding for the \$8.3 million Newfolden project — including a request to the Legislature for \$6.5 million — is crucial to getting a significant portion of Newfolden on the east side of U.S. Highway 59 removed from the 100-year floodplain, said Morteza Maher, administrator of the Middle-Snake-Tamarac Rivers Watershed District in Warren, Minnesota.

As it stands, the bonding bill — as it is commonly known — includes only \$5 million for flood hazard mitigation projects in the Red River Basin of Minnesota, an amount that would have to be split between the Newfolden flood control project and several other projects being developed by Minnesota watershed districts in the basin.

Bonding sessions to fund infrastructure projects only happen every other year, with funding coming from money the state borrows by issuing bonds for investors to purchase.

A funding request for the Newfolden project also was part of a proposal during the 2022 legislative session that didn't pass.

The Red River Watershed Management Board, of which the Middle-Snake-Tamarac Rivers Watershed District is a member, had requested \$73 million for a variety of flood damage-reduction projects in the Red River Basin, said Rob Sip, executive director of the Red River Watershed Management Board.

As outlined in HF 669, the appropriation for flood hazard mitigation projects for the entire state is just over \$34.3 million. Funds would be administered through the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources' Flood Hazard Mitigation Program.



Morteza Maher, administrator of the Middle-Snake-Tamarac Rivers Watershed District in Warren, Minnesota.

Contributed/Morteza Maher

The fate of the bill, which passed the House but was defeated in the Senate, remains in limbo, but the \$5 million proposed for flood mitigation projects in the Red River Basin is less than 10% of what's needed, Maher said.

“That doesn't cover our very essential projects that we have on hand,” he said.

FEMA designation

As the Herald reported in February, the need for the Newfolden flood control project dates back to 2016, when the Federal Emergency Management Agency — as part of a nationwide digital mapping initiative — designated the east side of Newfolden as lying within the 100-year

floodplain. That means the odds of the Middle River, which flows through Newfolden, reaching the 100-year flood stage in a given year is 1 in 100.

The designation affected 43 homes, along with a church, a park, an apartment building, multiple grain elevator structures and property zoned for future development — all on the east side of town — according to a project fact sheet.

Homes and businesses in affected areas are required to have flood insurance if they have government-backed mortgages. The city was unsuccessful in its attempts to convince FEMA that the east side of the city wasn't in the 100-year floodplain.

That won't change until the flood control project is complete. Because the scope of the project was beyond the city's capability, community officials asked the Watershed District to become a partner, Maher says.

The district then hired HDR Engineering, a company with a branch in Thief River Falls, to design the project. A project work team held at least nine public meetings before the project alternative that now awaits funding from the Legislature was developed.

Two components

The Newfolden Flood Prevention Project actually has two components. As part of the first component, the Canadian Pacific Railway in November began replacing a series of culverts at a railroad crossing on the Middle River with a bridge to remove the bottleneck of water on the east side of town during flood events.

That part of the project is near completion, and a ribbon-cutting ceremony will be held sometime in June after work wraps up, and equipment is removed from the site, Maher says.

The second part of the project, which is dependent on funding from the Legislature, involves constructing a 396-acre impoundment about a mile north of Newfolden to temporarily store water during flood events and lessen the downstream impact of the higher flows the new railroad bridge will accommodate.

The impoundment also would keep overland flooding from Judicial Ditch 21 out of Newfolden by temporarily storing water.

The watershed district has gotten both state and federal permits, as required, for the second part of the project to proceed once funding becomes available, Maher says. He also applied for another grant from the state to add "an environmentally friendly kind of feature" that would allow watershed staff to monitor, raise and lower the floodgates remotely.

"The plans are ready — 95% ready — construction documents are all good, ready to go out, but without having the funds on hand, we cannot (proceed)," he said. "Now we are getting closer to the legislative deadline to make a determination on the funding/bonding bill. We are not sure which direction they are moving, but our need is still there, and we want them to be aware of that."

Without that funding, the project will remain in limbo.

"Unfortunately, we likely won't know anything until the very end," said Sip of the Red Board. "It seems like it's that way every bonding year, and we really don't get details until the 11th hour."

Meantime, costs for the Newfolden flood control project and other unfunded projects will continue to rise with inflation.

“We asked for \$73 million, and even if we get \$5 million, it will be difficult to prioritize which project will receive the money when we have high demand for the funds,” Sip said. “We could probably get a real small project done, but it's just not enough money, especially when the state has such high financial reserves.”

Floods don't recognize political affiliations, added Maher of the Middle-Snake-Tamarac Watershed District.

“When the water rises, it doesn't look at whether you are red or blue as it enters your basement or destroys your crop,” Maher said. “I wish our legislators could argue with each other on less important matters than flooding people's houses.”