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Flood plain residents irked, relieved with idea of buyouts

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Though the Leon Valley City Council knew of the prospective buyouts of homes along El Verde Road that were part of a multi-million-dollar flood control project, it seemed to come as some surprise when residents lined up to speak at the Sept. 1 meeting. Christina Rangel, who angrily spoke of being forced out of her home unfairly, Rangel demanded answers. However, she spoke during the "citizens to be heard" portion of the meeting, and the council is not legally allowed to address issues that are not on the agenda.

"I want to know what the city is going to do about this," she said. "It just seems like no one cares."

After several minutes, Mayor Chris Riley broke her silence, assuring Rangel that the council did care and was even planning on helping to set up public hearings for citizens to express their concerns.

"This is part of a \$57 million flood control project that has three segments," she said to the audience.

Resident Ricardo Barrera agreed with Rangel.

"I see apathy from the council, mayor and city manager," he said. "I don't see any consideration for a resolution. I (had hoped) this was the last house I lived in."

Rangel's, however, was not the only point of view at the meeting.

Resident Rose Vera said she was in favor of the buyout, as did nearly half the people who spoke.

"We moved in in 2003," she said. "We have done a lot of improvements to the house, but I am for the buyouts. I want peace of mind. I've had restless nights. I don't want to live like that anymore. If they're offering, I'm taking."

Resident Kathy Campbell was also for the buyout noted that Rangel did not own a home on El Verde Road; Rangel's mother, in fact, was the homeowner.

Rangel said she spoke on behalf of her mother.

All of the homes in question back up to Huebner Creek, which has had a history of flooding.

County officials said the plan is to pro-active rather than reactive, and they are attempting to prevent another instance of the trouble that occurred from the major flooding in the area in 1998.

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In spite of Rangel's and others' claims of apathy from the Leon Valley City Council, Bexar County Flood Control Division Manager Arturo Villarreal Jr. said the city had in fact come to them twice to request that other options be researched.

"They came to us right when we started this," he said. "When we decided to do buyouts, we examined all the options, and we are now going back through that a second time at their request."

Villarreal said that though the citizens are exercising their right to protest the buyouts, the county has only their safety in mind. Currently, he said, the Leon Valley El Verde Road area, which also includes Jeff Loop, is the only area being considered for buyouts.

If the residents refuse the buyouts, Villarreal said the county will push on.

"Bexar County has the power of eminent domain, so that is an option that could be exercised," he said. "We are appraising the houses at fair market value, not taking into consideration that they lie in a flood plain."

The Leon Valley area is not the only area to see flood control projects. Bexar County is working all over the Northwest Area, which sees flooding not only from Huebner Creek, but Leon Creek, as well.

Though Leon Valley residents will have the opportunity to speak at public hearings in the coming months, no dates have yet been set, said Leon Valley City Secretary Marie Feutz.

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