

## District appeals widening of downtown flood zone

FEMA Delays Plan to Require Stricter Codes, More Insurance

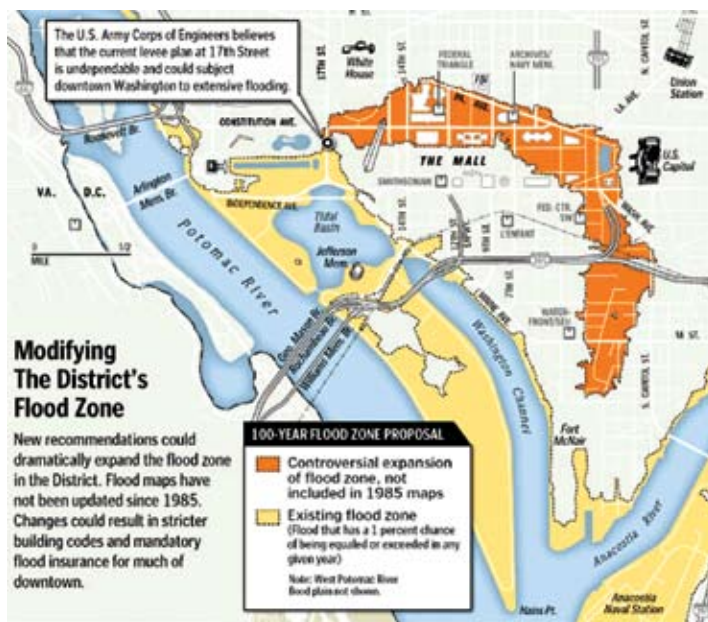
—by Michael E. Ruane

The Federal Emergency Management Agency has given the District more time to appeal new federal flood maps that would place large sections of downtown Washington in a hazard zone and result in stricter insurance requirements and building codes.

After receiving a joint letter from several city agencies, FEMA this month said it would wait until March 26 before giving final approval to the new maps. District officials have expressed deep concern over the maps, which show a proposed new flood zone several blocks wide and extending in a broad crescent from the Lincoln Memorial to Fort McNair. The zone would include Federal Triangle, much of the Mall to the base of Capitol Hill, and a large section of southwest Washington.

The changes would dramatically expand what is called the 100-year flood zone where residential flood insurance often is required, and more stringent building codes would take effect.

The flood maps, which are being updated in a post-Hurricane Katrina analysis, haven't been updated since 1985, officials said. The hazard zone then was far less extensive. If the new flood maps become official, residences in the zone with federally backed mortgages or with mortgages from federally backed banks would be required to have federal flood insurance, said Butch Kinerney, a spokesman for the FEMA directorate administering the National Flood Insurance Program. The annual cost of such insurance is about \$600, he said. Residences that are owned outright



would not be required to have the insurance, nor would commercial or government properties.

New buildings in the zone, however, will have to be constructed above certain base flood levels, which vary throughout the area. Officials have said projects such as the expansion of the Department of Commerce building and the construction of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture would have to be reviewed if the map changes are adopted because they would be partly in the new hazard zone.

The proposed new flood zones were drawn up after the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers reported last year that the so-called Potomac Park levees (which are designed to protect downtown Washington from Potomac River flooding) are inadequate. If the levees were brought up to standard, the map would be redrawn to shrink the size of the hazard zone. That, in effect, would minimize the number of residents who must get flood insurance.

The levee system consists of temporary and permanent

barriers at four locations—three on or near the Mall and one near Fort McNair. The Corps, which designed the system decades ago, decided after a 2006 inspection that, especially on 17th Street near the National World War II Memorial, the system was not reliable. “We don’t believe that the earthen dike is a dependable closure structure during a storm event,” said Tony Videl, head of levee safety programs for the Corps’ Baltimore district, which includes Washington. “We’ve always wanted a permanent structure there.” Corps declined to certify the reliability of the levees.

Based on Corps’ findings, FEMA drew up new flood maps for the District as if the levees didn’t exist. The maps were unveiled last fall, but they were not widely publicized until they were discussed at a Jan. 3 meeting of the National Capital Planning Commission. The commission wrote to the city suggesting an extension of the appeal period, which expired that day. FEMA agreed. [Washington Post, Jan. 24, 2008]