

\$ 1 billion needed for South Bay flood protection and marsh restoration

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A new coalition of business leaders, environmentalists and others will try to raise \$1 billion over the coming decade to protect corporate campuses, houses and schools from what one supporter called an "inevitable Katrina" in the South Bay, U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein will announce Thursday in San Jose.

Feinstein, in town to celebrate groundbreaking for a BART extension to east San Jose, will use the event as an opportunity to highlight the need for further investment in infrastructure -- specifically to build new levees and restore wetlands around San Francisco Bay.

Most of the work will be in the South Bay, where land sits below sea level and the gleaming corporate campuses of the high-tech economy sit behind fragile levees built a century ago to maintain salt manufacturing ponds.

"Our investment, which will be deep, isn't charity," said Carl Guardino, president and CEO of the Silicon Valley Leadership Group. "This is enlightened self-interest and insurance against a disaster or sea level rise that could happen tomorrow."

"We have to address it now while there's time and when it costs less," Guardino added.

Guardino said Wednesday's magnitude-8.6 earthquake off the coast of Indonesia is a reminder of what could happen here and noted estimates that the sea level in California could rise 16 inches in the next 40 years and 55 inches by 2100. Earthquakes, rising seas or even a storm could cause levees to collapse and lead to flooding, he said.

Some areas behind South Bay levees are as much as 13 feet below sea level.

"What we are facing is not a potential, but an inevitable catastrophe in the South Bay," said Steve McCormick, president of the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation and head of the project's steering committee. "It's really just a matter of time before these current levees collapse."

Over the past decade, government agencies and charitable foundations have invested millions of dollars on restoration projects. Tens of thousands of acres of former tidal marshes around San Francisco Bay have been purchased in an attempt to reverse the near elimination of wetlands around the bay during the past century.

San Francisco Bay resource managers have a goal to reach 100,000 acres of tidal marsh, or about half the historic acreage of marsh around the bay, including marshes along the Napa River in the North Bay and elsewhere.

There are about 45,000 acres of marsh now, and government agencies already own another 35,000 to 40,000 acres that could be converted to marsh, said David Lewis, executive director of Save the Bay.

Restoring all of that publicly owned acreage would get close to the restoration goal.

But in some areas, especially in the South Bay, the levees that must be breached to convert salt ponds to marshes are also protecting infrastructure.

About 80 percent of the money the group hopes to raise is needed to build engineered levees to protect lives and property from Redwood City, around the southern end of the bay and up to Hayward, McCormick said.

The partnership, which will include Bay Area business interests, environmentalists, government representatives and foundations, will try to raise \$1 billion over the next 10 years from a variety of sources that could include state bonds, funding from Congress, local tax measures, contributions from affected business property owners, and other sources.

The steering committee is expected to hold its first meeting next month.

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