



COUNTY OF SANTA CRUZ

701 OCEAN STREET, SANTA CRUZ, CA 95060-4073

(831) 454-2000 WWW.SANTACRUZCOUNTY.US

CARLOS J. PALACIOS, COUNTY ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

PRESS RELEASE

Date: May 24, 2021
Contact: Mark Strudley
831-454-2160

DESIGN AGREEMENT SIGNED FOR CRITICAL FLOOD RISK REDUCTION PROJECT

WATSONVILLE, CA – Federal, state and local officials gathered today at the base of a deficient levee along Salsipuedes Creek to sign a design agreement for the Pajaro River Flood Management Project, a long-awaited \$400 million effort to reduce flood risk for the disadvantaged communities of Pajaro and Watsonville.

“Levels of flood protection along the Pajaro River and its tributaries, like Salsipuedes Creek, are among the lowest of any federal flood control project in California,” said U.S. Congressman Jimmy Panetta, who is credited with helping to secure federal funding and support for the project. “Today’s action marks monumental progress in our efforts to reduce flood risk, protect vulnerable populations, and provide a more secure economic future for these communities. While this is our latest step forward, it is far from our last as we continue to forge ahead to ensure this project is completed and our communities are safe.”

The \$7.1 million agreement – signed by the US Army Corps of Engineers in partnership with the California Department of Water Resources, the Santa Cruz County Flood Control and Water Conservation District, Zone No. 7, and the Monterey County Water Resources Agency – will cover the project partners’ costs for pre-construction engineering and design for the initial phase of the project. Design and construction are to be cost shared, 65 percent by the federal government and 35 percent by local and state agencies.

“Executing this design agreement underscores our commitment to developing a robust design to protect people and property along the Pajaro River, a critical step as we push this project forward with our state and local partners,” said Lt. Col. John Cunningham, Commanding Officer of the USACE’s San Francisco District.

The original federal levee system for the Pajaro River was completed in 1949, but had twice failed by 1958. Although a fix was initially authorized in the Federal Flood Control Act of 1966, it was followed by decades of unsuccessful efforts that included the study of dozens of potential project alternatives. The situation became more urgent in recent history, with flooding occurring in 1995, 1997 and 1998. The 1995 flood caused more than \$95 million in damages and two deaths. Levees nearly broke again in the federally-declared storm disasters in early 2017.

“This is a major step toward ensuring equity for disadvantaged communities that have been neglected for too long,” said Zach Friend, Santa Cruz County Supervisor and Chair of the Zone No. 7 Board of Directors. We have a unique opportunity, in partnership with our state and federal partners, to protect the most vulnerable communities in our region by seeing this project through.”

The urgency to improve the region’s flood protection is not lost on the state, which is currently slated to cover all but 10 percent of the non-federal costs for the project.

“This project will reduce flood risk for vulnerable, historically underserved communities which is a key goal of the Governor’s Water Resilience Portfolio,” said DWR Director Karla Nemeth. “The Department of Water Resources is excited to work with our local and federal partners to complete this much-needed and long-awaited project to increase flood protection for the Town of Pajaro and the City of Watsonville.”

According to John Phillips, Monterey County Supervisor and Supervisor to the Monterey County Water Resources Agency, local agencies will continue ongoing efforts to increase state and federal investment in the project, which would otherwise be unaffordable for the economically disadvantaged communities it will ultimately protect. “We’re very encouraged by the USACE’s and DWR’s significant investment in our communities,” said Phillips. “Our state and federal partners are working to ensure our local communities receive the flood protection and funding they need and deserve.”

Next steps include the formation of the Pajaro River Flood Management Agency – a joint powers authority charged with financing the local cost share for the project – and supporting legislative efforts being led by CA Senator John Laird to increase state funding for projects that benefit disadvantaged communities.

#