



FloodWise

SPRING 2019

PROTECTING LIVES AND PROPERTY IN OUR COMMUNITY SINCE 1927

Levee Maintenance and the Challenges of History



Sacramento got its start as a town during the Gold Rush of 1849

when miners, entrepreneurs, and developers poured into the region. The city's location at the confluence of two rivers made it ideal for transportation, including California's first river steamboat, which started taking passengers back and forth to San Francisco that same year.

By 1850, however, the city's early settlers came to understand that the benefits of the city's riverfront location came with a serious downside. Two floods inundated the young city that year, causing community leaders to begin raising funds to construct protective levees along the American and the Sacramento Rivers.

The makeshift levees of those early days have long since been replaced by more sturdy structures, which have been upgraded many times over the decades. Still, some of the features built into and next to the levees over their long history still exist. Many were put in place when the levees ran through open and agricultural lands, rather than next to residential and commercial properties. Those features include pipes running through the levees and dirt ramps built to allow vehicles to drive up and over the levees, as well as stairs and landscaping features added by homeowners under government permits issued decades ago. They also include many illegal structures built on or into the levees.

In this newsletter, we'll look at some of the efforts underway to remove or replace those features to achieve the structural standards required to ensure adequate flood protection for our region.

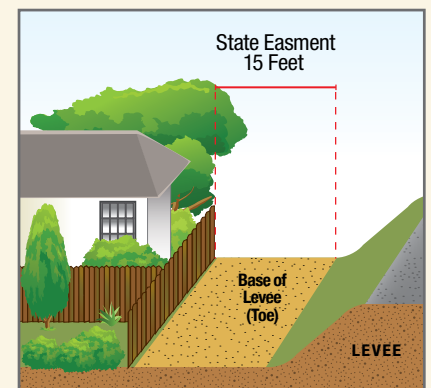
J STREET PICTURED ABOVE: *The megaflood of 1862 caused one visitor to write home that the entire Sacramento valley was "a lake extending from the mountains on one side to the coast range hills on the other."*

Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento Bee Collection, 1983/001/5657.

Who Owns the Levees?

That's a question people who live near levees sometimes ask. The simple answer is that the State of California owns the levee structures through an easement that grants access and control of levees for flood control purposes. In general, the state's easement extends out from the base of the levee 15 feet on the land side and 20 feet on the water side. The state grants authority to districts like ours to manage and maintain all land located within the easement.

The land under the levees is typically owned by a government agency. In our case, Sacramento County Regional Parks owns much of the land. In a few instances, large private entities such as Teichert Construction, Blue Diamond Almonds, and Bell Marine, own the land. In no case does an adjacent residential neighbor own the land under the levee or control access to the levee.



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When Your Neighbor Is a Levee...

The Glenbrook West neighborhood, located along the American River near Watt Avenue, was built in the late 1960s. The homes sit on land formerly occupied by some of the many hops fields that once covered hundreds, if not thousands, of acres in our region.

The levee that protects Glenbrook West was built when the area was still rural, and it included a broad dirt ramp that allowed vehicles to cross over to the river side. The ramp, which was little more than dirt piled next to the levee, was directly behind the home Frank Giordano and his wife bought in 1972. Over the next several decades, as weather took its toll, the ramp slumped and shifted down toward the Giordano's backyard. Every so often, Frank had to shovel away the dirt that had started piling up against the fence, rotting the wood, and seeping into the yard.

Frank's efforts to get help with the problem went nowhere until he spoke to Ross Kawamura, superintendent for American River Flood Control District.

"Ross told me he'd see if he could get something done," said Frank. "And he did."

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One of the project's challenges was that the Giordanos used an existing pathway up the levee for daily dog walks. They didn't want to lose access to the levee and open land on the river side, and they held a permit for stairs issued in 1971. Though permits for stairs on levees haven't been granted for many years, the cleanup project

destroyed the existing access, and the Giordanos still had the legal right to a stairway.

"It was very thoughtful of the district to create a walkway up the levee for us as part of the project," said Frank. "And because they laid a gravel path at the toe of the levee, we can walk to the ramp without walking through mud."

The project was a win for everyone involved. American River Flood Control District achieved its ideal of a clean, easy-to-maintain levee with adequate clearance at the toe of the levee for inspections. The Giordanos no longer have to deal with dirt moving into their backyard, and they can still get up and across the levee.

"It was a nice experience," said Frank. "Ross was wonderful to work with. He kept us informed throughout the project. And the district was thoughtful and considerate. They really took in our needs."



The American River Flood Control District redesigned the levee section, removed the dirt, and built a wide gravel path behind 15 properties, including the Giordano's.

NORTH SACRAMENTO STREAMS Flood Control Project Nears Completion

Work is nearing completion on upgrading levees along five North Sacramento creeks: Steelhead, Dry, Robla, Arcade, and Magpie. The joint project of the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, State of California, and Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency was based on engineering studies that evaluated how well the creek levees would contain flood waters. The final steps include finishing the levee slope grading and surfacing the roadway, which will be completed when the levees dry out from this season's rains. Once the project is complete, the American River Flood Control District will maintain the improved levees.

Property Owners Benefit

For property owners, the project provides a benefit beyond better flood protection. Bringing the levees up to the more stringent federal levee accreditation standards will also allow homeowners and commercial property owners in flood-risk zones to purchase more affordable flood insurance.



The shaded green area shows the district boundaries and the orange lines show the levees.

Repairing Levee Damage

Maintaining structural integrity is critical to ensuring the levees will function properly in the event of a flood. There are several causes for levee damage that can put the surrounding areas at risk of flooding—including damage from vegetation roots, rodents, and humans. As part of our mandate to keep the levees within our district structurally sound, we are often called on to repair damage caused by people digging into the levees, as well as damage caused by other outside forces.





FloodWise: A publication of the American River Flood Control District.

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Open to the public
Second Friday of every month at 11:00 a.m.

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Employee Spotlight

Malane Chapman, *Office Manager*

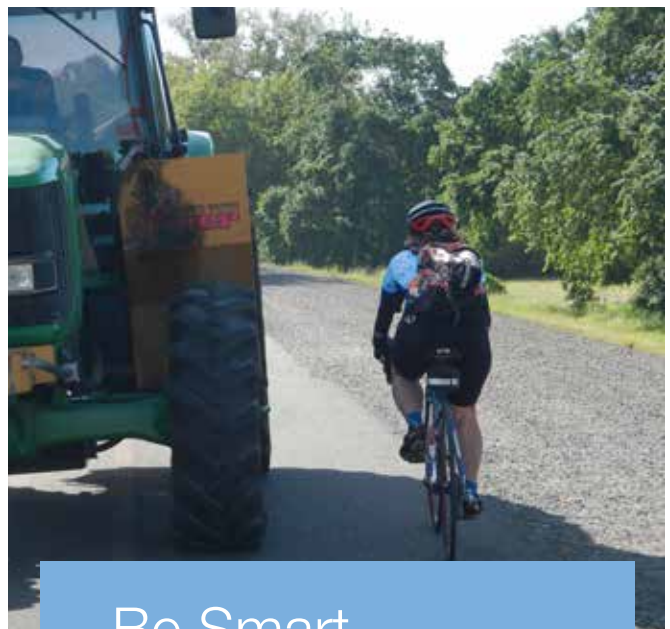


If you call our office, the first person you're likely to talk to is Malane (think of Elaine and add an "M" at the beginning) Chapman. Though Malane's official start date is October of 2016, she had worked for the district as a temporary replacement when the former office manager, Michelle, was on maternity leave.

The most common question Malane receives is from homeowners wondering

about the levee assessment fee they see added to their property tax bills. "People want to understand why they're paying the fee and what they receive in return," said Malane. "Most are more than satisfied when they understand all that the levees provide—critical flood protection, of course, but also a well-maintained place to walk and the chance to get closer to nature."

Asked what she likes best about working at the district, Malane doesn't hesitate. "There's a strong sense of family here," she said. "There are only nine of us, yet we manage to get some incredibly big things done. Our small size and the teamwork it takes to make things happen create a real feeling of family."



Be Smart. Stay Safe.

Digital distraction is a big cause of near misses, but we also encounter a surprising number of people who take dangerous risks around our equipment.