

THE BOND BUYER

Harris County flood control bonds could surpass \$1 billion

By

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DALLAS – Harris County Commissioners are considering a flood control bond plan for Houston and its suburbs that could range between \$1 billion and \$2.5 billion.

In opening a discussion Wednesday of how to size the bond proposal and when to seek voter approval, Harris County Flood Control District executive director Russell Poppe cited the need to provide local funds to match federal grant money. Typically, federal funding might match local funds in a three-to-one ratio, he said.

“Timing is important as far as being able to provide a local match when this money is available,” Poppe told the five county commissioners, who also govern the overlapping Harris County Flood Control District.

As the city of Houston, Harris County and surrounding counties continue recovery from last year’s Hurricane Harvey, they are uncertain how much they will receive from the \$15 billion Congress appropriated in February for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Commissioners agreed that the need for flood control projects in the county is enormous.

“If we did everything that needs to be done, that is a \$35 billion project,” said Commissioner Jack Cagle. “So we’re talking about nipping at the edges here and trying to get the federal funding we can as soon as we can.”

Commissioners suggested that voters might be willing to support a larger bond proposal while the lessons of Harvey are still fresh. After the hurricane came ashore Aug. 25, the Houston area was inundated in a record 50-inch rainfall. The storm did an estimated \$125 billion in damage, placing it on par with Hurricane Katrina that flooded New Orleans in 2005.

“After the most historic and horrific storm event we’ve had, it might be an opportunity to do something big,” said Commissioner Rodney Ellis. “I do feel strongly that we ought to go big, because I don’t think we’re going to get a second bite.”

Ellis and other commissioners also worried about the possibility of voter rejection of a bond proposal.

“If you have a bond election and it fails, you cannot come back to the voters for two years with the same proposition,” Douglas Ray of the County Attorney’s Office told the court.

Officials said an election could be held as early as June but that a low voter turnout could be expected.

The county is also launching a feasibility study of a proposal to build tunnels to channel storm water out of several county watersheds into the Houston Ship Channel. Meanwhile, the county continues to use federal funds to buy out thousands of property owners in designated floodplains using Federal Emergency Management Agency grants matched with county funds.

"Federal funding for home buyout has historically required local matching funds of at least 25%, although some grant programs are now paying up to 100% of eligible costs," the flood control district said.

Lawsuits by homeowners accuse the Corps of Engineers of withholding reports that residential areas would be flooded by runoff from two reservoirs.

The Corps denied withholding information about downstream flooding potential.

“Our review confirmed we held daily briefings, assigned trained liaison officers to provide flooding data to County and local officials and kept the public informed of flood risks,” said Edmond Russo, deputy district engineer for programs and project management at the Galveston District.

Russo said that in the lead up to and during Hurricane Harvey and the ensuing record rainfalls, the Corps of Engineers released critical flooding information to local officials and the public multiple times each day.

Records show inundation mapping data was routinely provided to local governments for their use in formulating evacuation plan, officials said.