

A Watershed Story about the Napa River

The Napa River drainage basin located just north of San Pablo Bay (a part of the San Francisco Bay system) is about 40 miles northeast of San Francisco, California. The Napa River drainage basin comprises 426 square miles. In the 1960's, work began on a flood control project based on a 1965 authorization. Over the years, interest in flood control waxed and waned. There was never enough local support sufficient for any version of the flood control plan to move forward.

Here's how the process worked then. The Corps would design a plan working with one sponsor. When the plan met public scrutiny it looked like a "final" plan. It would often meet disapproval.

In the early 1990's, following yet more flood events, a general design memo (GDM) was developed putting forth a standard trapezoidal concrete lined channel as the flood control structure. The plan was done internally with little or no involvement of locals, the general public, and certainly no potential partners. The design was disastrous since it did not reflect local needs and desires. It would have cut right through downtown, thus making it impossible for the City of Napa to proceed with some of their economic recovery plans (including a major tourist visitor site with a wine center). It would also have required many residents and businesses to relocate and would have moved other structures such as bridges and roadways. Moreover, the plan failed to recognize and thus incorporate opportunities for ecosystem restoration and other related resource protection and preservation – even though they seemed obvious to many.

The Corps plan was once again rejected.

This time the local residents formed a coalition to work on a more inclusive plan that would succeed. They joined with the Corps and other local, state, and regional entities. I must confess that there was tremendous opposition from some in the Corps to the idea of a local coalition taking a lead role. But the truth is that we began to see the light and the benefits of working collaboratively. The ad hoc planning group garnered strength as it developed alternative plans that realizing a wide array of potential opportunities and solutions. A key to success was the involvement of partners in the solutions. Another key success factor was a non-structural approach that both conveyed excess flood flows away from Napa and also generated ecosystem and habitat restoration benefits by using the available lands on the east side of the river (about 486 acres) for flood overflow and ecosystem restoration.

Thus, after nearly 50 years of effort to help the city of Napa, the plan came together and local interests agreed to cost-share in it. Every party involved owned a piece of the plan. The plan bypassed the constriction of the downtown area – even if it did have high land and relocation costs: \$137 million of the total estimate project cost of \$256 million. But the new plan reduced impacts on business and residential areas, thus allowing the city to proceed with its development plans. The design for overflow reduced the high cost that would have been spent on raising the bridge above the downtown area.

The moral of this story: Beneficial outcomes don't come cheap but they may reap savings in the end – especially in terms of priceless goodwill. Local overall costs will end up about half the total project costs, but, according to the Flood Control Act of 1936, the locals will receive a reimbursement for that portion of the costs that exceed federal costs. The proof of the acceptability of the new plan is the willingness of locals to pay the high costs associated with the project. The Napa County electorate passed a ballot measure in March 1998 agreeing to repay the local share. Part of the deal to get the County's approval involved promising the "upstream" portion of the basin that a comprehensive watershed study would be conducted there. So another moral of this story is that when people can see the benefits of the planning process, they want to proceed in implementing the plan. The watershed approach transformed an unworkable plan into an acceptable plan. And the residents of Napa were the beneficiaries. A fine example of a win-win outcome.