

Dixie flood funding falling far short

By **Nancy Perkins**

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ST. GEORGE — Funding to help pay for flood damage in Utah's Dixie is falling far short of what is actually needed, government officials here say.

"There are a lot of needs that are not being taken care of," St. George Mayor Dan McArthur said Tuesday. "We are pursuing every funding source we can, and we're spending money that we don't actually have."

Initial damage assessments compiled by area officials topped \$180 million from the January floods. Dozens of homes were either lost to floodwaters or condemned as unlivable. President Bush declared a federal disaster for Washington and Kane counties, which set the Federal Emergency Management Agency and its public assistance plans into motion.

FEMA recently closed its joint field office in St. George after completing an assessment of damages to public property and approving 145 work projects for federal assistance funds.

To date, FEMA has obligated or released a little more than \$5 million for some of those projects, said Derek Jensen, a spokesman with the state Division of Emergency Services. The money is released to the state, which funnels it down to the appropriate entity.

"Funding for most of the large projects is yet to be obligated," Jensen said. FEMA assistance is restricted to eligible public "small projects" that are either under \$55,500, or to "large projects" which can cost far more than that amount.

FEMA's assistance was appreciated, said McArthur, but the federal agency wasn't as helpful as he had hoped.

"They pushed a lot of it off on other agencies," the mayor said. "We're out in the cold on some things. We were hoping for more."

One of the large projects is a new bridge at Valley View Drive, a major artery road connecting two sections of St. George that was literally swept away by the Santa Clara River. A temporary bridge will first be installed while engineers develop plans for a new one, said Larry Bulloch, St. George public works director.

Bulloch is also unimpressed with the amount of federal assistance funds the city has so far received.

"The result has been quite disappointing," he said.

But there is much more work to be done and city crews are hard at it. Numerous roads, bridges, utility lines, golf courses, walking trails, and community parks were severely damaged when the Santa Clara and Virgin rivers surged far beyond the established flood plain maps. Even the ground some of the homes and utility lines were on no longer exists.

Piles of broken tree limbs, pieces of houses, and other debris are piled up in spots along the two river channels, which could create additional problems if spring runoff is high. That's a prospect that no one relishes.

"I feel more comfortable now. We're more prepared for spring runoff than we were before the flood," Bulloch said. "But the city's kind of had to move ahead on its own to get this work done in critical locations. We are hoping to get some of that money back through the state's \$25 million loan."

Another potential source of funding could come if Congress approves a request by Utah Sen. Orrin Hatch and Nevada Sen. Harry Reid. The two men are seeking more money to support the flood relief efforts in southern Utah and Nevada.

In an April 1 letter addressed to Sen. Thad Cochran, R-Miss., chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, the senators write, ". . . the greatest threat to these communities stems from the severely eroded river beds."

Fixing that problem, however, will take about \$66 million, according to the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS). So far, about \$9.2 million has been allocated by the NRCS to help with those restoration efforts.

"Additional funding is desperately needed," according to Hatch and Reid's letter, which requests additional funds to be provided in the Supplemental Appropriations Act to help the affected counties avoid future flood damage.

More money is definitely needed, said McArthur, but the city also needs permission to conduct repair work within the river channel itself now that the immediate emergency is over.

"We have to get a permit to work in the river now, so we're working through that process," he said. Issues arose because of the Endangered Species Act, which prompted the Fish and Wildlife Service to require the work permit.

McArthur said he plans a trip to Washington, D.C., next week to discuss the problem with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and other federal agencies.