

http://thefacts.com/news/article_e1775583-0b85-5d69-8c3d-a11315efe34f.html

Coastal spine project continues in Brazoria County

By CONNOR BEHRENS connor.behrens@thefacts.com Oct 14, 2018

FREEPORT — Storm mitigation project studies like the “coastal spine” concept are advancing on the Texas coast, but there is a greater focus on levees in Brazoria County.

On the Senate floor Wednesday, U.S. Senator John Cornyn discussed the America’s Water Infrastructure Act, which includes two of his provisions to advance storm mitigation projects along Texas’ coast.

“One piece of the bill we’ll be voting on this week will be to allow the Army Corps of Engineers to expedite a study on the so-called coastal spine that will run up and down portions of the Gulf Coast,” he said. “This is a new multi-layered system of storm surge and flood mitigation improvements to address our most acute vulnerabilities.”

The second thing the bill does for the state of Texas is authorize a project from an area known as the Sabine Pass to Galveston Bay, Cornyn said.

“Across more than 4,000 square miles of South Texas, this bill will update the levee system and in some cases construct new ones in order to better protect the area from storms and hurricanes,” he said.

The idea for the coastal spine developed after Hurricane Ike tore into Texas in 2008. The coastal spine, as proposed, should extend from Freeport, the home of Dow Chemical Co.’s largest manufacturing site, to Beaumont, home to Exxon Mobil Corp.’s chemical plants and refineries, state Sen. Larry Taylor has said.

Included in the project is a \$330 million storm surge barrier at San Luis Pass. According to the study, San Luis Pass is about 3,300 feet long with an opening of 22,000 to 33,000 feet.

If built as proposed, the coastal “spine” would extend to the San Luis Pass but not to the portion of Freeport where Dow Chemical Co.’s operations are. That’s because San Luis Pass is about 14 miles northeast along the coast from Dow’s Plant A, which also sits about 4 miles inland.

Instead, there will be a focus on levees near Dow Chemical Co.’s operations based on a Gulf Coast Community Protection and Recovery District 2016 study, County Judge Matt Sebesta said.

“The actual spine doesn’t even come into Brazoria County at all,” he said. “It is going through Galveston County. It is basically protecting West Galveston Bay and the Houston Ship Channel. That is the spinal part of it. But in Brazoria County, it’s improving the levees. It would be protecting Dow Chemicals.”

The spine concept in Brazoria County is more about improving the levees, Sebesta said.

“It is modernizing the levee system that is pretty much the Velasco Drainage District,” he said. “It would be improving their levee system. It would also be adding a levee around the Jones Creek terminal and around the Chocolate Bayou chemical complexes, as well as extending the levee from the Oyster Creek area extending it up towards Angleton. That is estimated to be about 74.2 miles of levee.”

The upgraded levee system in Brazoria would be \$2.6 billion in construction costs, Sebesta said. The complete Gulf Coast spine would cost about \$12 billion, he said.

“It’s several years away,” he said. “Until we get federal dollars to go into construction, it is not going to happen. It’s too much money for local government entities to take on. It’s going to take major federal participation.”

The Freeport Ship Channel backs up to Dow’s plants, as waterways also do with BASF Corp.’s terminal, Freeport LNG, Phillips 66, and many other Brazoria County businesses.

The Velasco Drainage District is more focused on improving the levees and systems that are already functioning.

“The Freeport area has been fortunate in that we already have a storm protection system in place,” Port Freeport CEO Phyllis Saathoff said.

Working together, the Port and Velasco Drainage District based their flood-mitigation needs off a September 2015 study on Sabine Pass published by the Galveston District Army Corps of Engineers for Galveston Bay Coastal Storm Risk Management, Saathoff said.

Like the call for the coastal spine in Harvey’s wake, the Sabine Pass study came about after the storm surge from Ike impacted it and Sabine Lake. The study states that while a seawall protected Port Arthur, the 14-foot storm surge brought devastation to the remaining half of Jefferson County, highlighting the need for flood mitigation knowledge.

The port is looking forward to working with Velasco on levees, Saathoff said.

“We will definitely be very engaged in what modifications are considered,” she said. “There is a lot of work to be done. We do have a lot of investment in our region as well as the community.”

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