Levee worries make Zoar a seepy little village

By Gary Brown
CantonRep.com staff writer
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ZOAR — Move it or lose it. That’s the decision that representatives of the historic Tuscarawas County community of Zoar and federal government officials may face because of the deteriorating condition of the Zoar levee.

“The levee still works well. It’s the ground under the levee,” explained Jon Elsasser, president of the Zoar Community Association. “If water stands behind the levee high enough and long enough, it percolates in the sand and gravel. They call it seeping.”

Mayor Larry Bell said the leakage of the sand and gravel may lead to levee failure — not a catastrophic flood, but enough of a danger that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has given the levee a “Dam Safety Action Classification 1,” its lowest rating, meaning the need to address the issue is “urgent and compelling.”

The corps, which constructed the levee about 75 years ago, is studying ways of solving the problem. Those include:

- Repairing the levee, which was estimated five years ago to cost between $100 million and $130 million.
- Relocating the buildings in the flood area to higher ground, which would include 90 percent of the historic structures in Zoar.
- Razing the buildings, breaching the levee and flooding the village.

An official from the Army Corps of Engineers, Huntington (W.Va.) District, said it’s too early to define any plan.

Aaron Smith, one of the project managers, said that the corps is in the “very early stages of the planning study” and that “we actually don’t have any alternatives.”

“We are getting an idea of potential failure modes,” Smith said, “so we know where the danger points are. From that point on, we’ll start to prepare a plan.”
He said the study is expected to take between 18 and 24 months from earlier this year. During that time the corps will continue to seek public input and answer questions concerning the study’s progress.

Eventual recommendations will include a range of alternatives. They will be reviewed by the corps and released for public review. Smith said the recommendations will consider financial, environmental, and historical issues — “what would work best, but also what would work best in protecting the resources affected.”

The corps was in town Wednesday to get input from residents.

“The Corps is being up-front and honest with us,” said Elsasser, whose organization contracts with the Ohio Historical Society to manage the state-owned historic buildings. “They’re telling us we need to show them intangibles.

“We don’t have a cost estimate, but I have to assume that moving the buildings or razing the village would cost less than repairing the levee,” he said. “They’re asking us to show them reasons why more money should be spent on the levee. And one of those intangibles is Zoar’s history.”

VILLAGE’S PAST

Zoar “was founded in 1817 by German religious dissenters as a communal society and today represents, in the words of the Ohio Historical Society, ‘an exceptional historic way of life,’ ” says “Save Historic Zoar” literature put out by Zoar Community Association.

“The community exemplifies the 19th century migration of western Europeans to the U.S.,” the literature notes, “and is known as one of the most successful and long-lasting communal efforts by early immigrants in America.”

The Separatist society, which founded the village, disbanded in 1898. Local residents and the Ohio Historical Society began preserving Zoar’s buildings in the 1930s. In 1936, 27 Zoar buildings were catalogued by the federal government in the Historic American Buildings Survey, and 75 percent of those structures remain in the village.

“Zoar has had very little contamination in the past by nonhistoric structures being built in the historical district,” Bell said. “And we’ve lost very few of the historical structures that were there.”

STRUCTURES AFFECTED

Buildings that would have to be moved or removed if the levee is not fixed include Zoar Hotel; No. 1 House; Zoar Store; the Tin Shop; the Bakery; the garden and the Garden House; and two log cabins that
are private homes.

Unaffected by the levee issue are the Old Schoolhouse; the Meeting House; a residence in the Weaving House; a print shop; and two houses outside the central lower portion of the village.

Elsasser said the corps would have to find higher ground for the buildings.

“It might require purchasing other people’s buildings, razing them and moving the historic structures to that ground,” Elsasser said. “But even if you did move all the buildings, you’d have a town that’s 180 degrees in reverse of the original village.”

Zoar is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Elsasser said. Efforts are beginning through the National Park Service to get recognition for the village as a National Historic Landmark.

“It’s a long and pretty expensive process,” Elsasser said. “That’s what some of the money we’re raising will go toward.”

**FUNDRAISING EFFORT**

Money brought in by the Save Historic Zoar campaign will be used to “raise awareness and build a case that Zoar is of historical significance,” Elsasser said.

Efforts are being made to work with state legislators to argue that the state ownership of the structures emphasizes their historic nature. And since Zoar is in the Ohio & Erie Canalway area, Zoar has received federal funding.

“If the federal government has invested in Zoar in the last 10 years,” Elsasser explained, “that helps the corps come to the conclusion that this is an important historical landmark, and we’d be spending money (to repair the levee) to protect that investment.”