

Two projects aim to protect Bernalillo from flooding

By [Elaine D. Briseño / Journal Staff Writer](#)

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Derrick Lente of the Sandoval County Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District stands near the Bernalillo acequia. (Adolphe Pierre-Louis/Albuquerque Journal)

The local agency that manages ditches, canals and the release of water for farming is embarking on projects that will protect the Town of Bernalillo from flooding and help rebuild the riverbank in Corrales.

The Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District announced recently that it will spend \$300,000 on Sandoval County projects. The first two projects will take place in Bernalillo.

Derrick Lente, chairman of the conservancy board who also represents Sandoval County, said the organization will contribute \$100,000 to start the process of reconstructing the levee in Bernalillo on the east side of the Rio Grande that runs from the border of Santa Ana to Sandia. The money will go toward drafting a plan for improvements.

The project, he said, is being done in conjunction with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. He said there is no timeline for completion, but the project will take years and, when it's finished, those approximately 500 residents east of the re-engineered levee will no longer have to purchase costly flood insurance.

“I’ve been pushing for projects in my area,” he said. “These are important.”

Jack Torres, an Eastern Sandoval County Arroyo Flood Control Authority board member and the mayor of Bernalillo, said the authority has already spent \$200,000 in engineering fees for the project. Two years ago, he said, the flood control board approached the MRGCD and asked if they would take the lead on the project.

After the flooding related to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, the Federal Emergency Management Agency changed the engineering standards for levees. Lente said those who live in flood zones with levees that were decertified because they do not comply with those new standards were forced to get flood insurance. The Bernalillo levee is not certified and Torres said this has been an issue.



Derrick Lente of the Sandoval County Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District stands on the levee just east of the Rio Grande. (Adolphe Pierre-Louis/Albuquerque Journal)

“Premiums went through the roof,” Torres said. “Then people were stuck. They had to pay them.”

The MRGCD also plans to work on the Bernalillo acequia in conjunction with several flooding projects the ESCAFCA is doing in the town. The acequia, Lente said, is for local farmers and was never designed to collect rain water.

However, when rainstorms in the area dump a lot of water in a short amount of time, the water runs off the Sandias into the town and inevitably flows into the acequia. A few years ago, Lente said, there was so much rushing water, it broke through the acequia and flooded nearby homes. The conservancy has put aside \$10,000 to study possible solutions.

Torres said the authority projects will help contain and control the flow of water, but the MRGCD is an integral part of controlling flooding in the area. “I’m thrilled MRGCD came in as

a partner,” he said. “No one agency can do this. For decades, not a lot of resources have gone into these issues and flood control is very expensive.”

In Corrales, the district has set aside \$200,000 to repair the Corrales siphon, which takes the water from the river to local farms for irrigation. Lente said the siphon has deteriorated over time. He said the project includes rehabilitating the river bed to protect habitat in the area. Lente said the engineering and design phase is done, and the project will most likely start before the end of the year



Work continues on the South Hill Pond west of Interstate 25 in Bernalillo in a bid to prevent flooding. The MRGCD will make improvements to a nearby acequia as part of the project. (Adolphe Pierre-Louis/Albuquerque Journal)