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D.C. flood-levee project stalls; main contractor is fired



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A view of one of two concrete forms that are part of the 17th Street levee project on May 16. (Bill O'Leary/The Washington Post)

By Michael E. Ruane May 16, 2013 Follow @michaelruane

Work on the controversial 17th Street levee, designed to prevent floodwaters from surging across the Mall into downtown Washington, has stopped, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers said, and it's not clear when the project will resume.

The levee is more than a year and half behind schedule. And last month, the corps fired the chief contractor after no significant work had been done for several months, said Chris Augsburger, spokesman for the corps' Baltimore district.

The \$4.1 million project is 75 to 80 percent complete but has become an eyesore, with a sidewalk closed on 17th Street just west of the Washington Monument and the site a stark construction landscape.

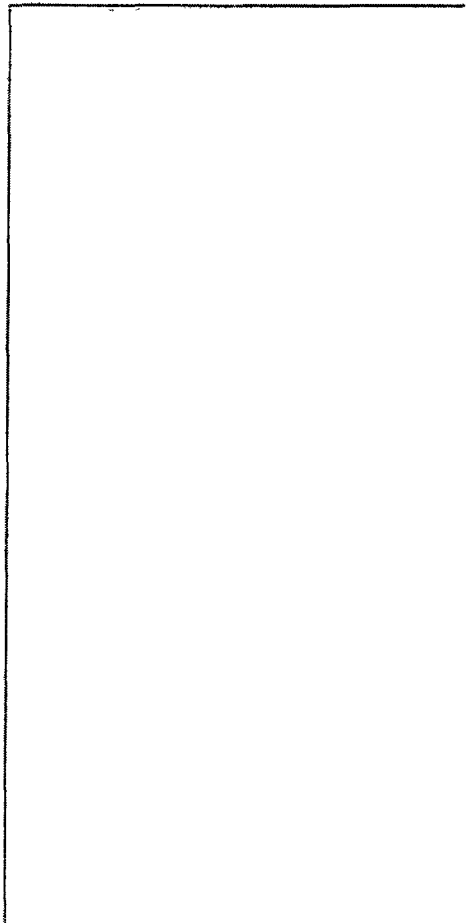
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the Mall, where throngs of visitors daily troop to the National World War II Memorial and the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool from the White House and the Ellipse. But what visitors see is the levee's two unfinished concrete barriers on plots of bare dirt, cordoned off with stockade fencing.

"It's been a few months that we've not seen significant work," Augsburger said. "It's an important project for the city. We have the re " " to ensure that taxpayer dollars are being spent wisely. As VIEW GRAPHIC as the prudent thing to do to make a change."

The corps is overseeing the project, which has A wall on the Mall been at least five years in the making. It ended the contract of Hirani Engineering and Land Surveying of Jericho, N.Y., on April 26, Augsburger said. The contract had been awarded to Hirani on Sept. 16, 2010.

The corps announced the start of the levee project at a news conference Nov. 15, 2010. It said construction would begin that December and conclude in summer 2011.

Augsburger said that construction didn't begin until January 2011, and the completion date subsequently slipped to October 2011, then to April 2013. Last month, a corps official said he hoped the project would be done this summer.

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Hirani has "been responsible for the construction of the project from the beginning to where it is today," Augsburger said.

Asked why the work hadn't gone forward, he said: "It's tough to say.

It's not something that I . . . can really answer."

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Several calls to Hirani with requests for comment were not returned.

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During a tour of the site last month, before Hirani was terminated, Anthony Vidal, the manager of the levee-safety program, was asked about the delays.

"There have been a lot of schedule changes," he said. "There were some issues with putting in the foundations, doing the work, getting the contractor up and running. . . . There's a lot of specialty items here that you can't go to Home Depot and buy."

The project called for the construction of reinforced berms, the concrete walls and a temporary "post-and-panel" structure to keep floodwaters from flowing north on 17th Street from the Tidal Basin.

The post-and-panel structure would consist of nine-foot-tall metal posts that, in the event of a flood, would be moved by a crane into six receptacles that have been dug across 17th Street. Aluminum panels would then be slid between the posts to form a barrier.

Once installed, the barrier would connect to the concrete walls and berms on either side of 17th Street.

The berms are mostly finished. So are the concrete barriers. But the barriers lack their decorative cladding, and the panels had not been fabricated, a corps official said last month.

"We're committed to ensure that this project gets done at the highest quality possible," Augsburg said. "We're not sitting on our hands. We're in the process of getting a replacement contract. . . . It's going to happen."

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The project is the result of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's nationwide review of flood-zone maps after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and parts of the Gulf Coast in 2005.

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When FEMA reviewed the District's flood zones, it concluded that the usual plans to use sandbags and Jersey barriers to prevent potential floodwaters from flowing north on 17th Street were inadequate.

FEMA foresaw a scenario in which a flood could inundate a huge crescent of downtown Washington from 17th Street and Constitution Avenue east to the Capitol and south toward Fort McNair.

It proposed placing the area — including Federal Triangle, the east end of the Mall and several Smithsonian museums — in the 100-year flood zone unless a better flood-prevention system was devised.

The new zone could have required property owners to buy expensive flood insurance, officials said. The levee was designed to satisfy FEMA and avoid that.

But it was never that aesthetically popular.

"I regret that, however minor, any structure is on this land," Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.) said when the project was announced.

"The notion of breaking this landscape is really heartbreaking to me and should be to all who value what the Mall stands for," she said. "But . . . there was nothing else to do."

Augsburger said the stalled project is bonded through Colonial Surety of Montvale, N.J.

"We guarantee the performance of the contract in the event that a contractor defaults on the contract or the owner defaults [on] the contractor," said Wayne Nunziata, the company president.

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"In the event that the contractor doesn't perform, and the event that all the terms and conditions are satisfied by all parties, we have an obligation to complete the contract," he said.

The situation can be complex, Nunziata said, but "we like to get these jobs done as soon as we can."

The case is "relatively new," he said. "It only came in a week or two ago. We hired attorneys. We hired consultants. We requested plans and specifications. . . . We requested some more information from the contractor." The next step is to "hire engineers, and we have them visit the site . . . and try to find a solution."

Augsburger, asked how soon work on the project might resume, said: "This is so fresh. We just don't know."

Mike is a general assignment reporter who also covers Washington institutions and historical topics.

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