

## Assemblyman James Gallagher has questions about spillway

*By Ashiah Scharaga, Enterprise-Record*

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Chico >> Assemblyman James Gallagher emphasized the importance of independent investigation into the Oroville Dam spillway crisis, changing operations at the dam and investing in state infrastructure maintenance on Thursday.

Gallagher (R-Yuba City) addressed Chico Chamber of Commerce members and city officials at the old city hall, fielding questions about the spillway and water management.

The assemblyman said he wants “solid answers” to many questions the community has: Why did the spillway collapse? How much was spent on maintenance over the years? What inspections were completed? And were there any warning signs of what should have been done?

“Should Department of Water Resources continue to be the one who operates Oroville Dam? It’s something that has to be discussed. Part of that discussion will be if they don’t, who does?” he said. “More than anything, I think many people feel, in discussions I’ve had, we need more input and more control over how that dam is operated in order to protect Oroville and the dam and the downstream communities.”

He said that is going to be his office’s No. 1 priority moving forward. The spillway needs to be “built the way it should be built” according to “modern standards,” to keep everyone safe, he said.

“I think the key thing we’re going to need to discuss is how do we change the operations at Oroville Dam,” Gallagher said.

In the Lake Oroville operations flood control manual, there are no variances in storage standards based upon snowpack or weather, Gallagher said. Dam operations need to change to give the state more flexibility with the flood buffer, he added.

Gallagher is planning legislative oversight hearings in Sacramento and Oroville, he said, so locals can provide their input and get answers. He will continue to support independent review, such as the one underway by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. People need to know what can and cannot be done, he said, and the spillway needs to be reconstructed the right way so this does not happen again.

### **Water infrastructure**

The assemblyman also spoke of state policy changes. California has not taken care of its infrastructure, he said. Every year, the state’s bridges, dams, roads and flood control structures are not identified as a priority in the budget for general fund dollars.

Gallagher said he is pushing for a specific plan that identifies what projects need to be repaired or maintained and dedicates a specific portion of taxpayer dollars to maintaining infrastructure every year.

The state also needs to invest in new water infrastructure that can increase its ability to manage water supply and flood control, he said, like Sites Reservoir. The proposed off-stream reservoir west of Maxwell has been studied for years.

Though he doesn't think the completion of Sites Reservoir would have prevented the spillway collapse, he said, projects like it can relieve pressure and allow operation of all of the state's dams to run "more efficiently and flexibly."

The state needs to stop thinking about water in terms of silos of "flooding and drought," because they're connected, he said. Water needs to be captured and maximized for all uses in California, he said, and it's important that infrastructure is in place to help veer that flow, especially during flood season.

Climate change exacerbates that problem, he added, especially with a large snowpack, earlier snow melts and "pineapple express" storms. That happened in 1986 and 1997: Huge storms caused flooding and evacuations and increased flows rushing down the spillway of Oroville Dam.

"This is the same story that keeps repeating itself, but we haven't changed how we operate," he said. "What we don't want is to keep the status quo. The status quo is clearly jeopardizing all the communities that live south of the dam."

### **Cost**

Gallagher had no updates on the estimated cost of the Oroville Dam emergency and main spillway repairs. According to a previous [Enterprise-Record](#) article, Gallagher's office was told by DWR officials the estimated daily average cost of maintenance and repair is \$4.7 million.

Taxpayers should not be covering the repair costs, he said. Water contractors that receive water from Lake Oroville will be responsible, Gallagher said. He added that is the general consensus from the Department of Finance, Gov. Jerry Brown's office and state water contractors.

Gallagher said it's his understanding that DWR will sell bonds to finance immediate repairs and water contractors will pay off the bond debt. Funding will likely come from the federal government as well, because it is responsible for the flood control at the dam. Emergency work is being accounted for so costs can be reimbursed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Oroville Dam is a great benefit for the whole state in terms of flood control, Gallagher said.

"However, we're the ones that bear the burden of this cornerstone piece of infrastructure that provides water to 26 million people in California," he said. "That water has to get down a system that we all live on and around. What it is we want to get across is there needs to be respect for our community, too, because we bear the burden of what happens, especially during flood season."

*Contact reporter Ashiah Scharaga at 896-7768.*

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