

Central Park or the Ninth Ward: the future of the California Delta

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KQED perspective *recorded 20 March, aired 22 March 2006*

Like New Orleans' Ninth Ward, the lands of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta lie below sea level. But cities around the delta are starting to build thousands of houses - on lands 5 ft or more below sea level. Many people find this incredible - why would we create our own California version of the Ninth Ward - a flood disaster waiting to happen.

But no - we are told levees will protect us. The governor proposes to spend billions on bigger, stronger levees, declaring an emergency to avoid environmental safeguards, and paying for it with bonds - so our children pick up the tab.

But building bigger levees won't make houses below sea level safe. In the next big earthquake, the ground beneath the levees will liquefy - turn into soup. No matter how big and strong, the levees *will fail* when the ground beneath them gives way. Moreover, the levees protect against the 100-year flood, but not bigger floods - so if you buy a house behind one of these levees, over the life of a 30-year mortgage, you still have a 26 percent chance of being flooded by those bigger floods. The levees give only the illusion of safety.

If we build houses in the Delta, the state of California will be on the hook for billions of dollars in liability when the levees fail. And we can expect some deaths. It seems crazy - but it pays. The developments are profitable, and the developers make big contributions to politicians: the governor pocketed 2.5 million from just one Delta developer.

But, as shown in a conference ReEnvisioning the Delta last week at UC Berkeley, there are alternatives. We can set aside some Delta lands as bypasses to manage the big floods. And the Delta could provide open space - it can be *Central Park* to what will be - in the year 2050 - a continuous metropolis all around it - from San Francisco to Sacramento to Stockton and back to Livermore. We know northern California will develop. The issue is whether we put houses where they will flood eventually, or whether we set low-lying Delta lands aside for a higher and better use - to improve flood safety and provide open space to the new megacity.

With a perspective, I'm Matt Kondolf