

Texas lawmakers quiet on new flood insurance program - The Galveston County Daily News: Local News

By WES SWIFT | Posted: Sunday, October 20, 2013 12:20 am

As more groups across the country lobby federal lawmakers to halt the changes to the nation's flood insurance program, Galveston County's Congressional representatives seem to be sitting on the sidelines.

As Congress returns to action after the government shutdown, at least nine bills have been filed in Congress that would delay or draw the changes that have caused many flood premiums for county residents to rise. In addition, an amendment added to a House bill that would defund the changes already passed the House, 281-146, in June and is awaiting action in the Senate.

But few Texas lawmakers have made any move on the issue. According to data from the Library of Congress, only three Texas Congressmen have sponsored or co-sponsored legislation that would address the flood insurance changes.

Rep. Steve Stockman, a Republican who represents southeast Harris County and portions of East Texas and formerly represented Galveston County, has introduced a bill that phases-in any premium increases from a real estate sale over five years.

Meanwhile, Pete Olsen, R-Sugar Land, and Gene Green, D-Houston, have co-sponsored legislation that would delay the changes for three to five years.

"We're aware of the changes, and Sen. Cornyn's office has been talking with stakeholders," said Katie Martin, a spokesperson for U.S. Sen. John Cornyn, the senior senator from Texas.

A request for comment from Sen. Ted Cruz, the junior senator from Texas, made through his press office was not returned before the weekend.

Rep. Randy Weber, who represents Galveston County, did not return a request for comment either. In previous comments, Weber said the Biggert-Waters Act was "a bad bill" and his office was monitoring the issue.

Passed in 2012, the Biggert Waters Act intended to make the federal flood insurance program self-sufficient after hurricanes Katrina and Sandy forced it to borrow \$24 billion from the federal government.

The centerpiece of the changes is the eventual elimination of subsidies for properties built before flood rate maps were adopted. Owners of those properties will begin to see increases in premiums by 2014.

People who purchase those properties will lose the subsidies upon closing on the property. Some real estate professionals already have seen potential buyers walking away from home purchases because of the changes.

“We get a call every day,” said Bob Mitchell, president of the Bay Area Houston Economic Partnership. “People have backed out and called off purchases either because, one, they can’t afford flood insurance, or two, they’re worried about the uncertainty about how much it will cost in a year, two, three or four.”

The partnership in August joined the Coalition for Sustainable Flood Insurance to lobby Congress and the Federal Emergency Management Agency to put the brakes on the changes. The organization has more than 80 members from Texas, Louisiana, New York, New Jersey, Hawaii, Georgia and Florida.

Other groups are getting involved. Two weeks ago, the National Association of Realtors sent a letter to FEMA Administrator Craig Fulgate, asking him to delay the rate increases. And U.S. Rep. Maxine Waters, D-California, and one of two sponsors for the act announced that the legislation had “unintended effects” they did not support.

“I am outraged by the increased costs of flood insurance premiums that have resulted from the Biggert-Waters Act,” she said in a statement. “I certainly did not intend for these types of outrageous premiums to occur for any homeowner.”

Many Texas legislators may not have jumped on the issue because they don’t understand the impact the changes could have on the state, Mitchell said. Cities that lay near any type of waterway could be affected, not just the coast. The partnership, meanwhile, has published white papers and sent letters to the Texas Congressional delegation urging them to act. But time is getting short.

“What our congressmen really need to start doing is what they’re paid to do, which is pass bills that help their constituents,” Mitchell said.