The nation has learned the critical importance of levee systems to flood protection. As a city surrounded by levees, West Sacramento was the beneficiary of a major levee construction project in the late 1990s—the $31 million West Sacramento Project, in which the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers raised and strengthened five miles of existing levees. Construction concentrated on the city’s western boundary, improving levee sections that had been identified in earlier studies. Not only did the project take the levees to new heights, but it also went deep below the surface—with the construction of slurry wall barriers, 40- to 60-feet deep along identified levee segments, to minimize water leakage at the base of the levees.

Unlike neighboring areas that are located in hundred year flood plains, West Sacramento’s level of flood protection is regarded as one of the strongest. In 1999, the Army Corps’ Lt. Col. Michael Walsh expected the levee improvements to provide West Sacramento, “the highest level of flood protection of any California city protected by levees.” Companies like Affymetrix, California Casualty, and Level III have located within the city, based in part on superior flood protection.

Despite this level of protection, the city remains vigilant. Prior to each storm season, meetings are convened by the city with agencies responsible for maintenance and monitoring of the levees surrounding West Sacramento—Reclamation Districts 900 and 537 and the California Department of Water Resources. Also participating are key city emergency responders: police, fire, and public works. The meetings discuss levee conditions, maintenance activities and expectations for the storm season (for which the 2006 forecast is normal), in addition to reviewing the inventory of flood preparedness resources.

“The city has always been keenly aware of its reliance on levees,” said City Engineer Caroline Quinn. “While concerns have risen in the region recently, the city has always worked closely with the reclamation districts.”

In fact, the city is one of a minority of agencies in the state that have formalized coordination of its emergency preparedness and response through a cooperative agreement with the local reclamation districts whose legal responsibility to inspect levees includes monitoring water levels and soil conditions. “Levees are constantly subject to changing conditions,” explained Quinn. “Weather and activities such as people walking on levee slopes cause erosion over time and it is important to constantly monitor levee conditions.”

The city’s Emergency Operations Center (EOC) is also ready to respond to flood dangers. The facility is the nerve center for directing personnel and resources in an emergency. Occupying the center are members of the city organization who are trained to fulfill specific functions, such as operations, planning or logistics. The center is also connected to a support system that includes Yolo County, the Sacramento region and the state. When West Sacramento was hit by heavy storms in early 1998, the city used area contacts to line up delivery of 6,000 sandbags in short order.

When surrounding waters reach threatening levels, the city is guided by its slow rise flood plan. It describes a series of stages, in which specific actions are taken as waters rise. It identifies when the EOC should open, how emergency information will be disseminated, and when evacuations are necessary. A copy of the plan is on the city’s Web site www.cityofwestsacramento.org.