

Whatever Became of the Auburn Dam?

One of the largest flood control projects in the country was never built

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The proposed but never built Auburn Dam was supposed to be 700 feet high and able to store 2 million acre-feet of water. (Photos by Fred Greaves)

The Auburn Dam could well be the most talked about water storage and flood control facility in the country that simply doesn't exist – no matter how much it's been argued about, advocated for and against, legislatively proposed and architecturally rendered.

Dreamed of for decades, and having prompted scores of editorials – as well as a new (and excellent) documentary, *“The Dam That Never Was,”* by writer-director Steve Hubbard – it still doesn't exist.

At first, the Auburn Dam sounded like a good idea when it was suggested almost 70 years ago; preliminary construction began a decade later. It would be a concrete weir almost 700 feet high on the American River's north fork, bordered by two counties: Sacramento and El Dorado. Intended to be built by the United States Bureau of

Reclamation as a component of its enormous Central Valley [P]roject and to be open for business about a half-century ago, it would have stored more than 2 million acre-feet of water, regulated the flow of river water and, as one of the tallest dams in the country, been a highly visible, even iconic model of flood control.

“There was significant political will among local, regional and congressional elected officials to build the project,” says water policy expert Ane (pronounced “Annie”) Deister, executive director of the statewide nonprofit Urban Water Institute since 2017 and a member of its board of directors for nearly three decades. “But because of the location, being an onstream project, the environmental impacts were significant. The recreation industry in the area had been established for a long time, and the environmental and recreational business coalitions voiced major concerns.



Ane Deister, executive director of the Urban Water Institute, said local and regional officials wanted to build the Auburn Dam, but the environmental impacts were too significant.

“Another consideration,” she continues, “is that the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation was the project sponsor” – meaning the federal government would be the owner and operator. “But a major impediment was the discovery of a fault line that would have had serious consequences due to the likelihood of an earthquake.” After earthquake retrofits were factored in, Deister says, “The project did not appear to pencil out.”

Deister has a first-hand knowledge of the ebb and flow of water and budgets. In addition to her current post, she was general manager of Placerville-based El Dorado Irrigation District and was in a top leadership post at the fabled – and feared for its geographical and political influence – Metropolitan Water District of Southern California (the agency Robert Towne thinly disguised in his screenplay for the film classic *Chinatown*).

Meanwhile, Lincoln resident Steve Hubbard used some of his Silicon Valley retirement time and money to finance the aforementioned film, *The Dam That Never Was*. While even-handed, the straightforward documentary – which Hubbard produced, directed, wrote and narrated, aided by students in his Sierra College filmmaking course – makes it clear that the dam that wasn't built never should have been from the get-go.

“Its location was always problematic,” he says, “which early (19th-century) inhabitants of California recognized. They knew flooding would always be a risk unless the dam was properly sited.”

Even so, Hubbard adds that when he started researching his film, “I could ask six different people in Auburn why they thought the thing shouldn't be built and come away with six different answers.” Those included earthquake fears – two years after a magnitude 5.9 earthquake in 1975 near Oroville Dam, preliminary construction came to a dead stop, even though that dam is about 50 miles away from where the Auburn Dam was being situated – as well as stratospheric costs (more than \$6 billion) which could be recovered only minimally, such as by selling hydroelectric power generated by the water. Other reasons given for the Auburn interruptus was the disruption or downright destruction of habitat, such as spawning salmon, by altering the basic functions of the river.

For years, a pro-construction lobbying group called the Auburn Dam Council met regularly in the hope of reviving interest in the project. When it began in 1959, it was led by Bill Cassidy, then-publisher of the *Auburn Journal*. Multiple efforts to reach it or its members were futile and its phone number has been disconnected.

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Asked if she thinks any dam could ever be built in California, much less Auburn, despite the demonstrated flood-control need, Ane Deister remains optimistic.

“Interestingly, the Sites Reservoir Project, being designed in Northern California about 10 miles west of the town of Maxwell (in rural Glenn and Colusa counties) has a good chance of being built,” she says. “The Sites Project Authority describes the project as a generational opportunity to construct a multi-benefit water storage project that helps restore water operations and supply flexibility.”

In November, the Bureau of Reclamation and Sites Project Authority moved ahead on the Sites Reservoir Project. Sites would be the second largest off-stream reservoir in

the nation and would increase Northern California's water storage capacity by up to 15 percent.

"The unique feature is that Sites is not a traditional reservoir project, located adjacent to a water source," she continues. "It's an off-stream facility, designed to capture stormwater flows in the Sacramento River, after all other water rights and environmental regulatory requirements have been met." She says the project is being designed "with climate change resiliency," adding that "supporters and users include both urban and agricultural agencies. That is a big deal. They have money and support from the California Department of Water Resources and Congress, as well as many would-be water users throughout the state."

Could the Auburn Dam Still Become a Reality?

These are some of the considerations water consultant Ane Deister says would need to be made to resurrect the moribund Auburn Dam project:

"An off-stream location and agreements to not divert recreational flows," she says, while "addressing the value of the reservoir to mitigate flood impacts associated with atmospheric rivers – a climate-change driver."

It would take a project that offered "multi-purpose benefits of flood control, operational flexibility and tie-ins with other existing reservoirs in the state system during drought conditions," she says. Deister also feels that buying and designating "natural areas for protection into perpetuity could be part of a recreational or educational program in the area." But she warns it would take "diverse community engagement early in the design and concept phase, consideration of a new off-stream location, (specific) multi-purpose benefits and users and interactive dialogues with native California communities."

- Ed Goldman

<https://www.comstocksmag.com/article/whatever-became-auburn-dam>

F.O.R. addendum: (1) The proposed Auburn dam would border Placer and El Dorado Counties, not the counties of Sacramento and El Dorado, (2) It is unclear how Auburn dam would be an "iconic model of flood control"; its 250,000 acre-foot authorized flood reservation is not particularly large in comparison to similarly sized reservoirs in the state, nor were the contemplated reservation rules different than others; indeed, at 11.4% of total storage capacity, the proposed flood reservation capacity was rather small, (3) From contemporary

accounts, the additional costs associated with Reclamation's new (1980) design did not appear to be the major financial stumbling block for project sponsors (the six-billion-dollar estimate was made in 2006); instead, it was the President Reagan's cost-sharing reforms that made it clear that the federal government would actually require that 100% of the costs allocated to the project's water and power features would have to be assumed by project water and power beneficiaries – and potentially paid “up front” rather than over decades in water and power rates (4) The thinly disguised agency in “Chinatown” was the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, not the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, (5) The article's quotation of Steve Hubbard that the Auburn dam's “location was always problematic,” ... “which early (19th-century) inhabitants of California recognized. They knew flooding would always be a risk unless the dam was properly sited.” As written, this cannot be true. If referring to the dam's proposed location, such inhabitants would neither be aware of the site's seismic-risk geology nor able to conceive that such a large dam could be built. Of course early 19th-century inhabitants were aware that the Sacramento region was floodprone, but the only solutions available at the time were floodplain land-use restrictions, levees, and land-surface raising, (6) The distance between the Oroville Dam and Auburn dam sites is irrelevant to whether Reclamation's Auburn dam authorized in 1965 would be subject to catastrophic failure along faults or weak zones at the Auburn dam site from the reservoir-induced seismicity then provisionally demonstrated by the Oroville earthquakes; after a review, Reclamation in 1980 would announce a redesign of the dam in hopes of a more seismic-safe dam, (7) A more relevant comparison than northern California dam storage capacity (given the large service area proposed by the Sites Reservoir Authority) is that the proposed Sites Reservoir would increase statewide storage by 3.57% and water deliveries by 0.66%. (8) Relevant to the article's speculation that Auburn dam might be revived, the article should have noted that Reclamation's Auburn dam water rights were revoked by the State Water Resources Control Board in 2009, (9) Finally, there may be some dispute over whether Steve Hubbard's documentary, as it existed at this writing, is “excellent.”