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Region's future will be tied to infrastructure we build today

By Congresswoman Doris O. Matsui, California's 5th Congressional District

In last month's State of the Union address and in his 2012 budget proposal, President Barack Obama reminded Americans what those of us in Sacramento already know: For our economy to thrive, we must focus our efforts on job creation and invest in our nation's infrastructure. I could not agree more – targeted investments can create jobs and give us a city built for our current and future needs.

Our region's economic future is tied to what we build today. Our infrastructure takes many forms, but one of the most important is strengthening our levees and dams. Business owners need to know they are investing their capital in a safe area. Homeowners can save money on lower rate insurance when the risk is lowered. Families will move to an area when they know they are safe.

To address the Sacramento region's flood threat, several projects are currently under way, but they need our continued support. As a whole, these projects comprise a comprehensive strategy to protect our community from the threats of flooding – from the Sacramento River, American River and our urban creeks.

One of the largest projects is the new spillway at Folsom Dam, called the Joint Federal Project. By building a new spillway next to the original Folsom Dam, the Bureau of Reclamation will have much more flexibility to release water during severe flood events.

Currently, Folsom Dam can only let water out once it has almost filled because the gates are near the top. The new spillway will have flood gates much lower in the dam and allow water to

be released much earlier in the storm, thereby preserving more space for greater inflows during a flood event.

Another large project under way is the Natomas Levee Improvement Project. It is critical because the Natomas area is one of the deepest parts of Sacramento's floodplain. This levee project will build much larger and wider levees adjacent to existing levees – tremendously increasing their strength.

After Hurricanes Katrina and Rita ravaged the Gulf Coast in 2005, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers greatly increased the standards to which communities are required to build their flood defenses. Under the old standards, Natomas had what is called 100-year level of flood protection. After levee deficiencies were found and standards were raised, Natomas was found to have only a 33-year level of protection. Our work in Natomas is urgent and must continue.

Another project, smaller in scale but no less important, is the South Sacramento Streams Group project. Our city is not only surrounded by two mighty rivers, but also has several urban streams that run through it. These streams can swell during a flood event and cause shallow but extensive damage to homes in their path.

In recent years, thousands of homeowners have been lifted out of the floodplain because of work done by SAFCA, the state of California and the Army Corps of Engineers, but an unacceptable number still remain. Morrison, Florin, Elder and Union House creeks will continue to receive a combination of levee raising, floodwall construction and channel improvements in order to increase the south area's level of flood protection.

While this work continues, we know that our work is never done. Like roads, levees age and often need to be improved. For example, the Common Features General Reevaluation Report will soon provide us with recommended next steps to even further increase our level of flood protection.

Once the Folsom Dam spillway, the Natomas Levee Improvement Project, the South Sacramento Streams project and the General Reevaluation Report are complete our flood protection will be greatly improved. The goal of SAFCA (which is the local agency responsible for all of these projects) is to provide the entire Sacramento region with at least 200-year level of

flood protection.

Our flood protection projects help us achieve our goal of creating jobs while strengthening our infrastructure.

The Sacramento of the future will continue to strengthen and build our infrastructure with expanded light rail, more development downtown and new technology sectors that meet our energy goals. We need to protect all of these investments with a strong and safe flood protection system.