

State Port Sees Up to 7 Years Before Cecil County Dump Victims Get Safe Water; But State Wants to Re-Open Earleville Dump Next Year

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The Maryland Port Administration (MPA) and the US Army Corps of Engineers foresee a timeline of four to seven years before several hundred Earleville homes whose wells have been polluted by a shipping channel dredge spoil dumpsite finally get clean, safe water piped in from the town of Cecilton, according to documents presented at a meeting of state, federal and Cecil County officials last week.

But the MPA and the Corps want to resume dumping of new dredge spoils at the Pearce Creek dumpsite next year—many years before the local residents get reliably safe drinking water.

The meeting, held at the Corps offices in Chesapeake City, was notable because it was one of the first sessions at which representatives of the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) were present and discussing with state, federal and county officials concerns about the residents' water issues caused by the federal dumpsite. (Cecil Times was the only media representative present for the meeting.)

MDE holds the trump card in the matter, since the Corps cannot re-open the Pearce Creek dump—closed to new dumping for over 20 years due to groundwater pollution concerns—unless MDE grants a “water quality” permit. MDE has previously notified MPA and the Corps that no permit would be issued unless the local residents' water well contamination was remediated. (A 2013 independent study by the federal US Geological Survey confirmed local residents decades-long complaints that the Corps' dump had polluted local water wells, including contaminants such as arsenic.)

The MPA is desperate to find dumpsites for shipping channel dredge spoils in the upper Chesapeake Bay. MPA has offered to pay an unspecified amount toward the costs of running a pipeline from the town of Cecilton about 7 miles out to Earleville, and initial hook-ups for current residents.

The water system would be owned and operated by the town of Cecilton, whose Mayor, Joseph Zang, has taken a leading role in finding a solution to the Earleville water problem. Zang, the town administrator, town engineer and water system contractor attended the recent meeting. “If we're going to own it and operate it, we're going to be in charge,” Zang said.

Cecil County Councilor Alan McCarthy (R-1), the only county elected official to attend the meeting, said he wanted to make sure that local residents have safe water supplies as quickly as possible.

David Blazer, the MPA's director of dredged material management, said the Port would not support any construction of a Cecilton water pipeline “until we know the [dump] site is going to be re-activated.” And “that's the reality,” he said.

Many local residents, plagued for decades by poor water quality especially in the West View Shores and Bay View Estates communities, have grumbled that the Port's position amounts to water blackmail to force them to back down on pollution concerns and opposition to renewed dumping, or else.

Blazer said at the recent meeting that re-opening the dumpsite “is a very high priority obviously for the port,” and “we want to make sure this works.” He said the MPA might be willing to front some money to the town of Cecilton for its attorney costs and some engineering expenses for planning, but not construction, purposes.

Blazer refused to provide Cecil Times with the timeline document he distributed to attendees at the meeting. But Cecil Times obtained the document from other sources present at the session.

That timeline showed that the MPA and the Corps expect they would be allowed to resume dumping at the site, located at the end of Pond Neck Road in Earleville, by October, 2015. In contrast, the timeline projects that the provision of safe, clean water to area residents would only be achieved in a timeframe of a minimum of four years to a maximum of nearly seven years. That is, about a year and a half for dumping to resume versus up to six years and ten months before local residents have safe, clean water supplies.

During the meeting, Cecil County Health Department environmental health director Fred von Staden said “there is a public health need” to provide safe drinking water to the Earleville community affected by the dumpsite. He said that to ensure safe water supplies for the entire community, it would be necessary to cap and abandon homes' individual wells and hook them into a new community water system supplied by Cecilton.

Salid Kashali, program administrator of the water supply program of MDE— said he was “excited” that there was a potential solution to the local water well pollution via the town of Cecilton pipeline. The MDE has been dealing with the issue “for 20 years” but until now, and the town of Cecilton's offer, there had been no previous solution to the problem. “We're trying to expedite the process as much as we can,” he said.