

Cecil County Council Questions Possible US Army Corps 'Plan' for Earleville Dumpsite; Hodge Ponders Expedited Meeting

May 1, 2013

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The Cecil County Council, including Council President Robert Hodge (R-5), demanded answers Tuesday when told that the US Army Corps of Engineers would soon be presenting a design plan to state environmental officials to deal with the Corps' polluted dumpsite in Earleville and would meet with county officials after talks with the state.

Council Manager James Massey told the Council at a worksession Tuesday morning in Elkton that he had contacted Corps officials about a previous request from the Council to schedule a meeting about the Pearce Creek dredge spoil dumpsite in Earleville. Hodge had previously resisted a call by Councilor Joyce Bowsbey (R-2) for an immediate meeting and said further talks should be held off for a few months until after the Corps had more time to develop plans to correct pollution at the dumpsite itself and how to provide safe drinking water to local residents— whose water supplies were contaminated by the dumpsite, according to a US Geological Survey study.

But Hodge voiced concerns, and suggested an expedited meeting, after Massey said he was told that the Corps was planning to meet with Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) officials in the next few weeks “to discuss the proposed design for Pearce Creek.” Massey told the Council that the Corps was “willing to meet with us after they finalize their plan.”

“I’m surprised they’re moving forward with a design without getting a permit from the MDE,” said Councilor Diana Broomell (R-4), who has been openly critical of the Corps' handling of the pollution issue.

The Corps—and the Maryland Port Administration (MPA)—want to resume dumping of dredge spoils at the Earleville site, located at the end of Pond Neck Road, but must first obtain MDE approval of a water discharge permit. There has been no additional dumping at the site for 20 years, but the recent USGS study found contaminants from the dumpsite, including arsenic and beryllium, persist today in many area residents' wells.

Hodge, who had previously taken a laid-back approach and said it was unclear whether the Corps would really go ahead with resumed dumping at the site, was surprised Tuesday and directed Massey to get more answers from the Corps.

A Corps official told Cecil Times Tuesday evening that the agency has not finalized any plans for the site, or resolving local water issues, but wants to present design proposals for fixing pollution at the dumpsite itself to the state to see “how they want us to proceed.”

But Council members were concerned about moving forward on resolving one part of the problem without addressing the other.

“What about the water system” to serve local residents, Hodge asked. “I think that’s more critical.”

“Very much so,” Bowsbey added.

“I think that the number one priority is how do we fix the damage that’s already been done,” Hodge said. “There’s two distinct items here,” he said—fixing residents' water problems and then “re-opening [Pearce Creek for new dumping] if it’s going to happen.”

“I don’t want to get into the weeds on a design until we hear what the plan is,” Hodge said. “If they’re doing design work we want to know what the plan is,” the Council president said, and “if they have a plan we want to have a meeting right away.”

Residents of the affected communities – West View Shores, BayView Estates, Sunset Pointe and Pond Neck Road—have attended meetings to voice their concerns about resolving the problems with their water supplies and contamination of several aquifers in the area by the dumpsite. One possible solution is extending municipal water from the town of Cecilton some seven miles to the affected communities, with local infrastructure installed to hook-up individual homes.

“The big question is who is going to pay for that,” Broomell said Tuesday.

Apart from how to provide clean, safe drinking water to local residents is the issue of how to contain the existing contaminants at the Corps' dumpsite. Among the alternatives previously discussed is a “slurry wall” of a clay and composite material or a more costly membrane “liner” to be constructed beneath the existing dumpsite. US Rep. Andy Harris (R-1) recently told the Cecil County Council that he favored a “belt and suspenders” approach, using both the liner and slurry wall to safeguard the community and the adjacent Elk River and Chesapeake Bay.

Tim Kelly, project manager for the Corps who has been leading the agency's local efforts to deal with the Pearce Creek site, told Cecil Times that his agency planned to meet with MDE officials as a “first discussion” to see if they are on the same page and “how they want us to proceed” on fixing the dumpsite itself.

“We have two avenues,” Kelly said, and they are “parallel avenues.” The Corps is focusing on fixing the dumpsite itself, which the Corps owns, while the Maryland Port Administration (MPA) is looking at the community water supply aspects. “One will not be done without the other,” Kelly said.

“We’re still formulating a plan,” he said, on an “engineering fix” for the dumpsite.

He said that the Corps is considering usage of both a slurry wall and a liner. But the design would depend on whether the site would be allowed by the state to resume dumping, or whether only remediation of existing pollution without renewed dumping would be allowed. “It’s two different designs,” he said.

As far as the “capital improvement costs” of hooking local homes into a new water supply, such costs would be “borne by somebody—federal or state,” Kelly said. But a new water system would require ongoing operating and maintenance expenses and—if Cecilton town water were piped in—water bills covering the cost of a proposed bulk rate water purchase from the town.

However, most area residents already pay a hefty price in water conditioning and treatment system purchases and maintenance—expenses that could be eliminated if a trusted new water source served the communities.

And questions of water contamination of individual homes' water wells—even newly drilled deeper wells— could depress or prevent sales of existing homes in the area. In contrast, the Cecilton municipal water supply is professionally operated and monitored and won a recent national “taste test” contest for its high water quality.