

Feds to Seek State Permit this Month for Earleville Dump; Water Pipeline to Replace Local Polluted Wells Still Years Away

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The US Army Corps of Engineers plans to formally apply for a state environmental permit later this month to allow resumed dumping of shipping channel dredge spoils at an Earleville dumpsite, with a “conditional” permit expected to be issued by October, state and federal officials said Saturday.

The permit is expected to be contingent upon the Corps and the Maryland Port Administration carrying out promises to install a membrane liner over the Pearce Creek dumpsite and pay for extending a water pipeline from the Town of Cecilton to provide clean, safe water to local residents whose individual wells have been affected by the dump.

Residents of three communities affected by the dump—West View Shores, Bay View Estates, Sunset Point and some individual homes along Pond Neck Road—turned out Saturday at a community update event on the project. Under bright sunshine at the Bay View boat ramp on the Chesapeake Bay, several county and state elected officials mingled with residents and discussed the project with Corps, MPA, and Cecilton officials.

The Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) would have to issue a water quality certification before dumping could resume at the site and the agency has a maximum of one year in which to decide once a formal application has been filed. MDE must hold a public hearing before reaching an official decision. But MDE, Corps and MPA officials have been meeting informally for months and the environmental agency has advised about the criteria that would have to be met.

Tim Kelly, the Corps’ project manager for the C&D Canal, said those consultations should result in a swift decision by MDE. He said the Corps expects to receive a conditional permit by October, contingent on the Corps installing a full membrane liner over the dumpsite and installing test wells to monitor water quality there in the future. He said the liner and monitoring well project is expected to cost about \$12 million and take about eight months to construct. The Corps hopes to resume dumping by October, 2015.

The permit would also require that area residents be supplied, at MPA expense, with clean safe drinking water via a pipeline from the Town of Cecilton.

According to state budget documents, a \$12 million allocation has already been set aside in the capital budget providing for a grant in that amount to be made by the Maryland Port Administration/ Maryland Department of Transportation to the Town of Cecilton in Fiscal Year 2017—which begins 7/1/16—to cover the expected costs of extending the water pipeline about 7 miles to the affected communities and hooking up an estimated 241 existing homes to the town water supply.

So far, the MPA has made available a \$190,000 grant to the town for preliminary engineering and design work to get the project started, according to David Blazer, who has headed the MPA’s dredged material management program and recently moved up to the deputy director for harbor development post, which oversees shipping channel dredging and finding sites to put dredging spoils.

“We’re committed to seeing this through,” Blazer said.

But the MPA’s commitment to the pipeline is only as firm as the willingness of MDE to issue the water quality certification to allow resumed dumping at the Pearce Creek site. MPA officials have said the Earleville dumpsite is crucial to keeping vital shipping channels open in the Upper Bay to serve the Port of Baltimore. Dumping stopped twenty years ago amidst concerns by local residents and the MDE about the impact of the dump on local drinking water.

Cecilton Mayor Joseph Zang, who spearheaded the effort to run a pipeline to provide town water to the Earleville communities, fielded questions from local residents and said engineering work is proceeding by the town’s water system operator, URS Corporation, of Newark, DE.

Some local residents who own lots but have not yet built homes on their land questioned whether they would be included and could have a tie-in to the pipeline to connect a future home. (Existing homes will be hooked up to the Cecilton system at no charge to homeowners.)

Chris Rogers, principal planner for URS, said the current plans provide for hooking up 241 existing homes. There are 380 total lots in the area, although some homes occupy more than one lot. Rogers said the cost of the pipeline and connecting existing homes is estimated to cost about \$12 million.

Some residents want to keep their existing wells, even if only to water their lawns. But Rogers and other officials explained that all local wells would have to be sealed and shut down to prevent possible contamination of the new system.

The Saturday event, featuring two tents with exhibits about the project, drew several local elected officials including Cecil County Executive Tari Moore, County Council President Robert Hodge (R-5) and Councilor Alan McCarthy (R-1), whose south county district includes Earleville.

State Sen. Steve Hershey (R-36) and newly appointed District 36 Del. Steve Arentz, from Queen Anne’s County, also attended the event. Hershey cited a bill (SB 1096) he introduced in Annapolis in March to require the MPA “to develop and implement a plan for the remediation of drinking water supplies that have been impacted by” the dumpsite. The bill had a committee hearing but no action was taken on it. A companion bill in the House was introduced but went nowhere.

Hershey said he thought the bill served notice on the MPA that state legislators would keep a close eye on the project to make sure environmental and water quality concerns were resolved.

The Army Corps denied any responsibility for the pollution of the local wells until an independent study by the US Geological Survey concluded in January, 2013 that the dumpsite had indeed polluted several local aquifers and altered the waterflow in the area, which is immediately adjacent to the Elk River and the Chesapeake Bay. Since then, the Corps, MPA and local officials—especially Mayor Zang—have held numerous meetings to come up with the plan for the dumpsite liner and the Cecilton pipeline to address the issues.