

Baltimore Port Hosts PR Tour to Press Cecil County for Renewed Dumping in Earleville; Cheap Ideas for Polluted Water Wells?

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BALTIMORE—The Maryland Port Administration pulled out the big cranes, the big cargo ships, a modest motorboat for a putt-putt water tour and a great big goose-egg zero on a chart Tuesday to try to convince Cecil County officials of the need to resume dumping shipping channel dredge spoils at the Pearce Creek dumpsite in Earleville, which a federal study found was responsible for polluting local residents' drinking water.

Without Pearce Creek, shipping in the Upper Bay and the C&D Canal will cease, MPA officials claimed. The dumpsite has not been used for new deposits in 20 years due to concerns by state environmental officials about water quality problems in the area.

In related developments, MPA and US Army Corps of Engineers officials held the latest of several private meetings with a limited and select group of Earleville area civic association leaders at a Chesapeake City restaurant on Monday and said the agencies would come up with their own "plan" to deal with the local drinking water contamination, sources told Cecil Times. And a key MPA official said the agency was looking toward an "on-site" water system rather than the locally popular option of piping in top-quality municipal water from the town of Cecilton.

In Baltimore, the MPA put on the charm offensive—hosting three members of the County Council, senior county staffers, a Congressional aide, and members of the press for a tour of the Port of Baltimore and some of the marine terminals that are the heart of the "economic engine" that is the Port. There were lots of statistics: the Port employs 14,000 people, the MPA owns six marine terminals (including one that operates on a long-term lease to a private contractor) and there are 30 other private marine terminals at the Port.

The Port is among the top-ranked marine operations in the nation, topping even larger cities in many cargo categories, MPA officials said, expressing pride that Baltimore is the top auto port in the nation for imports and exports. And the most expensive cars in the world (can you spell Lamborghini) choose to ship to the US through Baltimore because of its reputation for kid-glove handling of precious automotive cargo.

Then came the harder-sell. "The dredging program supports the Port's economic engine and sustains jobs in Maryland," according to a slide in a presentation given in a conference room at the Seagirt terminal with a panoramic view of the water and port operations.

Frank Hamons, MPA's deputy director for harbor development, said that the C&D canal, which crosses Chesapeake City in Cecil County and provides a vital shipping link, requires 1.2 million cubic yards a year of dredge spoil removal to keep the canal viable for major cargo shipments. (For the past 20 years, that spoil has been dumped in an open-water disposal site that was closed to future deposits about two years ago under new state environmental rules that ban open-water dumping.)

Then came the big goose-egg zero and the point of the entire Port visit. The currently available capacity for dumping the C&D dredge spoils over the next 20 years is "O"—according to a chart that listed the Pearce Creek dumpsite as the only available site for those deposits.

Community activists have suggested multiple other sites for possible dumping of the canal and Upper Bay dredge spoils. But the MPA and the US Army Corps of Engineers, which does all the shipping channel dredging and owns the Earleville dumpsite, have insisted any other option would be too costly due to transportation costs.

The MPA and the Corps are aggressively trying to re-open the Earleville dumpsite for new dredge spoil deposits. (But the Maryland Department of the Environment—MDE—holds a trump card and must issue a water quality certification before dumping can resume.)

An independent US Geological Survey study released in January, 2013 concluded that the Corps site was responsible for current contamination of area residents' drinking water wells even though there has been no new dumping in the past 20 years. Pollutants found in local aquifers and home wells include arsenic, beryllium and multiple contaminants.

As part of the Port PR tour, the Cecil County delegation was taken on a motorboat trip to show other dumpsites that are exclusively tasked to take dredge spoil from the nearby Port of Baltimore. As the small vessel rocked and swayed, David Blazer— the MPA's Chief of Dredged Material Management and a key figure in trying to re-open Pearce Creek for new dumping—said that the two Baltimore-area sites were functioning in harmony with local communities and provided needed dredge spoil deposit sites.

During the water tour, there were no residential areas visible. But Blazer said there were some residential areas "on the other side" that were not visible by water. Under questioning by Cecil Times, Blazer said that those sites had anti-pollution steps already in place—such as a membrane liner and a slurry wall to guard against groundwater pollution. And he conceded that those areas had local government-provided piped water services rather than individual private wells.

The Earleville dump does not have any such pollution protections, although the Corps is discussing inserting a membrane liner over part, but not all, of the dumpsite and a slurry wall in one area. The Corps wants to resume dumping over the entire 200+ acre dumpsite. Earleville area residents do not have county-provided piped water and rely on private wells, many of which are polluted by the Pearce Creek dumpsite.

Under questioning by Cecil Times, Blazer said that a recent Earleville community questionnaire was evaluated with 66 respondents out of more than 240 local residents to whom surveys were sent. However, that survey and its cover letter—sent about a month ago—did not specify a deadline for residents' response.

Blazer told Cecil Times that the MPA and the Corps were looking at an "on site community solution" and were leaning against a locally popular alternative to pipe in certifiable clean water from the town of Cecilton, some 7 miles away. He said the Cecilton option seemed to be too costly, but he added that no decisions had been made. The basic infrastructure costs for fixing the local well pollution problems would likely be borne by the MPA, so reduced costs benefit that agency.

In addition, the MPA official did not specify how an on-site option—such as drilling a large community well, into the same aquifers that have been deemed polluted by the Pearce Creek dumpsite— would address local residents' concerns to provide guaranteed safe drinking water and assure that residents could sell their homes in the future.

Meanwhile, Blazer and Corps officials held a private, limited guest list chat-and-chew meeting Monday night at a Chesapeake City restaurant to discuss the Pearce Creek dumpsite. (It was unclear how that, and some previous private restaurant meetings, complied with state and federal public information and open meeting regulations for discussions of public policy issues.)