

Earleville Residents Demand Expedited Water Service Before Feds Resume Spoils Dumping; State Holds Enviro Hearing

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Residents of three Earleville area communities told state environmental officials Saturday 9/27/14 that they must receive safe, clean drinking water before the US Army Corps of Engineers gets possible state approval for resumed dumping at its nearby Pearce Creek site, which has polluted area aquifers and drinking water wells.

About 100 area residents attended the meeting at Cecilton Elementary School, during which state, federal and Cecilton town officials outlined the process for re-opening the dumpsite and a proposal to run a pipeline about eight miles from the town of Cecilton and hooking up existing homes to the municipal water system. The three communities affected by the dump, located at the end of Pond Neck Road, are West View Shores, Bay View Estates and Sunset Pointe.

Citizens demanded immediate provision of bottled water by the Corps until the pipeline is completed; assurances of full repair of private community roads that would be dug up to install pipes; monitoring of future water quality in the area—including beaches adjacent to the dump area—if dumping is renewed; and speeding up the construction timetable for the water line to coincide with any renewed dumping at Pearce Creek. (The Cecil County Health Department stopped monitoring the West View Shores beach this summer, for the first time, as a cost-cutting measure.)

The Corps has applied to the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) for a water quality certification that is required before the dumpsite can be re-opened to deposits of shipping channel dredge spoils. The dump has been closed to new deposits for over 20 years, but the Corps and the Maryland Port Administration (MPA) want to resume dumping next fall. (Currently, the timetable calls for hooking up homes to the Cecilton water system in mid-2017.)

“You guys want to poison us for four more years,” said one Bay View resident.

“Reactivation of Pearce Creek is a very high priority for the Port” of Baltimore, said David Blazer, the MPA’s key player in the dumpsite issue. MPA has said it will foot the bill—estimated at about \$12 million—to bring a water pipeline from the town of Cecilton to homes in the three communities. But MPA has conditioned its financial commitment on getting what it wants: an MDE water quality permit to re-open the dump.

“We are more concerned about our health than the health of the Port of Baltimore,” said Valerie Woodruff, president of the West View Shores Civic Association.

MDE is the only entity standing between the residents’ demands for safe, clean drinking water and the politically powerful Port’s dumping agenda. The Corps, MPA and MDE officials have had numerous closed-door meetings on the issue even before the Corps formally filed its permit application on 7/1/14. Saturday’s public hearing was held as part of the state-required process for reviewing the application.

Several times during the hearing, state and Corps officials spoke as though granting of the permit was inevitable, talking about “when” a permit is issued, rather than “if.”

And they indicated they expected an MDE decision in the next few months. By law, MDE has a full year to decide, from the 7/1/14 date of the formal application.

Some local residents do not want any renewal of spoils dumping in the environmentally critical area, adjacent to the Chesapeake Bay and the Elk River. But the future of their drinking water is at stake in what amounts to the political equivalent of blackmail: no dumping, no money to fix the polluted well water supply. Legal action against the Corps, the perpetrator of the pollution, would take years and potentially millions in legal fees so the more pragmatic approach by local residents has been to try to work with state and federal officials to achieve a resolution to their water problems.

“If you don’t get the permit does that mean our water supply goes away,” inquired Bobbi Jopling Shetzline, a West View Shores resident.

“They are related,” responded Blazer.

Several citizens expressed doubts about the MPA’s financial commitment to a water supply solution and whether the funds MPA has said it will provide will really be there for the project — or if they might be re-allocated to some other state spending priority.

Blazer said he was “98 percent sure that this money will not be taken from this project” for other state projects. He said funds had been placed in capital budgets as a “transportation” item since keeping the shipping channels open and deep is a necessary part of Port operations.

Meanwhile, MDE officials said the permit, if issued, would only be for one year and the Corps would have to re-apply for future dumping approval. But during that one year period, the Corps wants to dump over 1.3 million cubic yards of spoils at the Pearce Creek site.

Several residents urged that fire hydrants be included as part of the new water system, pointing out that residents have to pay very high insurance premiums because the nearest fire station is eight miles away. Initial discussion and drafts of the water pipeline plan included adding fire hydrants for a modest extra cost. But MPA proceeded only with the bare-bones pipeline and hookups to individual homes as a cheaper option.

Ken Cowley, a Bay View resident and a leader in the local fight over water quality, questioned where the water flow would be discharged after spoils were deposited and water drained off. In its letter to local citizens, MDE said the application provided that the water would be pumped into the adjacent Elk River. But under questioning by Cowley, Corps officials said they were “considering” continuing to pile up the water in Pearce Creek. (Earlier studies have indicated that the creek’s water holding area is already overloaded, Cowley said later.)

Bill Haines, president of the Bay View Estates homeowners association, said immediate provision of bottled water to local residents was crucial: “The residents did not create this mess; the US government did.” He also called for speeding up the pipeline construction, and safeguards that local aquifers were not further polluted by renewed dumping, considering the proximity to the Bay.

Meanwhile, documents presented at the hearing showed that the costs of Cecilton water to Earleville residents are vastly cheaper than what most residents now pay to operate water treatment systems and replace plumbing and appliances on a regular basis due to the poor quality well water.