

State Port Agency Offers \$ to Extend Cecilton Town Water to Earleville Homes Contaminated by Army Dump; But Price of Clean Water is Letting Dump Re-Open

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The Maryland Port Administration, anxious to resume dumping of shipping channel dredge spoils at an Earleville site that has contaminated nearby residential water wells, has told county officials and local residents it is willing to pay for extending a waterline from the town of Cecilton.

But there is a big catch: the money, and the clean water, apparently will only be made available if state environmental officials issue a water quality permit to re-open the dumpsite that has been closed to new deposits for 20 years. And inherent in that quid pro quo is pressure upon the local communities—primarily West View Shores, Bay View Estates and Sunset Point—to agree to a water deal and back down from some residents' efforts to block resumed dumping at the Pearce Creek site, which is owned by the US Army Corps of Engineers.

Cecil County Councilor Alan McCarthy (R-1) convened an informal meeting with a small group of residents from West View and Bay View on Tuesday to discuss recent discussions he has had with MPA officials in which a water line proposal was made. The MPA—which considers the Pearce Creek dumpsite crucial to future operations of the Port of Baltimore—was willing to come up with money to run a water pipeline some seven miles from Cecilton to deliver town water, and current local residents would not have to pay hook-up fees to tie their homes into the system, McCarthy said.

Cecilton Mayor Joseph Zang— who first proposed supplying town water to the affected communities in Earleville and has spear-headed numerous meetings with Port and Corps officials to advance his concept—explained Tuesday that the town's municipal water system would assume ownership of the pipeline, maintain lines to homes and handle billing for individual water usage. He estimated the cost of the pipeline, pumps, and linking individual homes to the system at about \$13 million.

MPA has not said precisely how much it would pay nor how it would come up with such a significant sum, but McCarthy said the agency wants to pay the costs now and then not have any further involvement with the water system.

Under questioning by some local residents, Zang said that the town would charge the Earleville residents rates comparable to those paid by in-town residents, plus costs to cover maintenance of the pipeline, pumping water through the line and a reserve fund for future repairs. He offered a rough estimate that, based upon a home's usage of 200 gallons of water per day, an Earleville family would pay from \$800 to \$1,000 a year for the municipal water.

Most of the residents said they used smaller amounts of water and greeted even that estimate enthusiastically, pointing out that they spend much more than that now on maintenance of costly water treatment systems, which often still do not make their well water safe or palatable. And the current poor water quality damages appliances and water pipes in many homes, requiring frequent replacement.

Bill Haines, president of the Bay View Estates Civic Association, brought along a filter from his water treatment system to show off debris accumulated in a short period of time. As he spoke, white powder and clumps of mineral deposits fell off and landed on his clothes and the carpet of the county administration building's Elk Room in Elkton.

Nearly a year ago, an exhaustive independent study by the US Geological Survey concluded that decades of dumping of Chesapeake Bay shipping channel dredged materials at the site— located at the end of Pond Neck Road and adjacent to the Elk River and the Chesapeake Bay— had altered the water flow in multiple underground aquifers and contaminated many homes' water wells. Among the materials found in water samples were arsenic and beryllium—toxic substances—as well as “total dissolved solids” and other contaminants at levels significantly higher than clean water standards.

For many years, the Army Corps denied any responsibility for water problems in the area but faced with the USGS findings, the Corps has been involved in discussions of how to remediate pollution on the dumpsite itself. However, the Corps has so far declined to offer funding for delivery of safe, clean water to the local residents and instead is focusing its efforts on trying to win MDE approval of a water quality permit to renew dumping at the site. MDE officials have said they refused to renew a past permit 20 years ago due to area water quality concerns.

Although there has been no new dumping in 20 years, the recent USGS study found persistent levels of toxic materials in local aquifers due to past dumping.

Eric Sennstrom, Cecil County's director of planning, told the residents that he has participated in meetings with environmental officials of the Corps and MPA at which it was disclosed that MDE has rejected a recent proposal by the Corps to install a membrane “liner” over half of the dumpsite covering a hole in the aquifer that the USGS said was infiltrated by the dredge spoils. The Corps wanted to use a cheaper solution—an aggregate “slurry” wall separating the left side (where the hole is located) and the right side and resume dumping over both sides including the “hole” area.

Sennstrom said that MDE told the Corps it must cover the entire dumpsite with a membrane liner and the slurry wall was now off the table as a possible solution.

But some local residents question whether dumping should be allowed to resume at all, and cautioned county officials not to sign off on any proposed quid-pro-quo deal to trade Cecilton water for an OK on renewed dumping at the site.

“It's up to MDE to decide” whether to issue the required water quality permit, said Ken Cowley, a retired DuPont engineering executive from Bay View who has been a leader in reviewing scientific data on the pollution issue. “Buying us off is probably a good thing for the Port,” he said. But the county should not “sign off” on a deal with the Port before a Cecilton water system extension is guaranteed and provisions are made to allow the MDE to exercise its independent judgment on whether to allow renewed dumping at the site.

“I'm just trying to be pragmatic,” McCarthy said. The Port doesn't want to spend the money to bring safe, clean Cecilton water to Earleville unless it believes it is assured of having a dumpsite for its shipping channel dredging, he said. And it would be very hard to “stop this train,” propelled by the economic and political powerhouse of the Port, so the community should consider taking a water deal while it can get it. “So you tell me what you want to do,” he added.

McCarthy also said that MPA officials want to resume dumping in Earleville in the fall of 2015—before a Cecilton water supply extension would be finished for the affected homes. Zang said he estimated it could take 2 to 2 ½ years before the water link was completed, and there would be several regulatory hurdles to pass, such as obtaining rights of way to install the pipeline and amending the county’s water master plan, as well as a state OK on expanding the permitted capacity of the Cecilton town water system. (The town has more than enough physical capacity to supply the Earleville homes, but must get a state permit to approve using that extra capacity.)

Several residents said they wanted to make sure they had a clean, safe water supply in place before any resumed dumping at the Pearce Creek site was allowed—or the MPA and the Corps might renege on their promises.

“There’s not a lot of trust here,” said Cawley. “The Corps has been a terrible, terrible neighbor.”

Also attending McCarthy’s meeting were County Executive Tari Moore and Councilor Diana Broomell (R-4). Councilor Robert Hodge (R-5) attended briefly but had to leave for another commitment, while Councilor Joyce Bowsbey (R-2)—who has met repeatedly with local residents on the issue—said she had another meeting to attend but “wished them well” in the Earleville residents’ quest for clean water.

David Blazer, the MPA’s Chief of Dredged Material Management and a key player in the discussions with county officials and local residents, was said to be out of his office for the next few weeks when Cecil Times sought comment on the situation Wednesday.

Cecil Times has submitted a list of questions to MPA officials— including how much is MPA willing to pay for a Cecilton waterline to Earleville, where will the money come from, and will the MPA seek a special appropriation for the project in the 2014 session of the General Assembly. We will update this report upon a response from MPA officials.