

FEATURED

Underlying tension exposed as Pearce Creek work progresses

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Elder Ghigiarelli Jr., deputy manager of MDE's Wetlands and Waterways Program, left, and Bill Haines, president of the Bay View Es Community Association, discuss the timeline of the Pearce Creek water projects.

CECILTON — As work pushes along to seal the Pearce Creek dredge disposal site in Earleville, the simmering tensions between residents of the neighboring communities and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers cropped up at a meeting Friday.

Members of the West View Shores, Bay View Estates and Sunset Pointe communities met with officials from the Corps, Maryland Port Authority, Maryland Environmental Service, Maryland Department of the Environment and AECOM on Friday morning during a routine meeting of the Pearce Creek Implementation Committee, which is monitoring the work of fixing the natural issues with the Pearce Creek Dredge Material Containment Area and the installation of public water service to the communities. While residents were informed that all projects are on schedule, some were still confused as to the terms of the deal that made both possible.

Norine Haines, a Bay View Estates resident, questioned why the Corps was planning on disposing its first dredge spoils at the Pearce Creek site in October 2017 when the on-lot hookups for community residents aren't due to be completed until March 2018.

Since the Corps' water quality certificate was approved by MDE two years ago, it was never required that the water lines be completed before the Corps could use the site but only be under construction, explained Kristen Fidler, committee chairwoman. Initially, the projects' timelines lined up almost completely. Months of delays in advertising and bidding the water line and transmission projects, however, have pushed the completion schedule back to March 2018.

Fidler's assertion was backed by Valerie Woodruff, president of the West View Shores Civil Association, who said she never believed the water line would be done in time.

But Bill Haines, president of the Bay View Estates Community Association, agreed with his wife, adding that that he and others believed that initial conversations between the parties required that the water lines be completed first.

"That was the impression that we were given," he said. "Everybody in Bay View is thinking that."

Jerry Jones, the Corps' C&D Canal project manager, asked Haines why it mattered that the projects were completed simultaneously if residents are provided an alternative water source. Around Memorial Day weekend, bottled water began to be provided to all households due to U.S. Center for Disease Control concerns about manganese levels in some local well water. That dissemination, paid for by the Corps, will continue to all homes until they are hooked up to public water.

"Even if people are under that impression, does it matter at this point? Water isn't coming out of the faucet but you have water," Jones said.

Haines' response underscored the feelings of many in the Pearce Creek communities.

“To be very blunt, the Corps can’t be trusted,” he said. “We’ve dealt with the Corps for years, and we’ve gotten a lot of gobbledygook ... For 25 years, (the Corps) knew that something was wrong and back in 2000, the county knew something was wrong because the Corps would not let them dredge Stemmers Run boat ramp and pump the spoils into Pearce Creek DMCA.”

At Friday’s meeting, a state environmental official noted that completion of the water line was never required prior to dredge dumping, but it was an issue that MDE debated.

“I personally, in granting the authorization, struggled with that,” said Elder Ghigiarelli Jr., deputy manager of MDE’s Wetlands and Waterways Program. “I struggled with the thought of ‘At what point are we sure that the water supply project won’t be derailed? Should we require that it be entirely completed before material could be placed at the site?’”

Ultimately, Ghigiarelli said MDE decided that once the water pipeline was under construction, the parties would be unlikely to turn back. Therefore, the department decided the Corps would not have to complete an alternative water source prior to dredge spoil disposal at Pearce Creek, he said.

“The Corps has met that requirement,” Ghigiarelli said.

Meanwhile, Corps officials told residents that 70 percent of the synthetic liner is in place and about 85 percent of the DMCA has been graded in preparation for the project. The first disposal of new material in the lined area is still scheduled for October 2017.

A groundwater management plan and discharge monitoring plan are under development by the Corps in partnership with state agencies in order to ensure that local water tables are not being contaminated into the future and the liner is working.

Meanwhile, AECOM, the contracted engineering firm for the town of Cecilton, is continuing to oversee the building of a water line from the edges of the town to the affected communities. On-lot work at Pearce Creek-area homes will begin in May 2017, with half of the homes to be hooked up by the start of dredge season on Oct. 1, 2017.