

Army Corps still investigating solutions to Pearce Creek water issue

By Jacob Owens jowens@cecilwhig.com | Posted: Wednesday, October 23, 2013 5:15 am

EARLEVILLE — About five months ago, the Army Corps of Engineers began investigating ways to solve the groundwater contamination issue present in the Pearce Creek communities due to its dredge spoil disposal.

Since that time, Corps officials have continued to meet with a variety of state, county and town officials about several different options to supply clean drinking water to residents.

Tim Kelly, Army Corps of Engineers C&D Canal project manager, said the Corps is waiting on a response from the Maryland Department of the Environment about a design plan submitted to install a liner and slurry wall around the Dredge Material Containment Area in an attempt to prevent future contamination. He said his office expects to receive a response by the end of the month.

The project entails building an 8,000-foot-long, 100-foot-deep “slurry wall,” made out of bentonite, and placing a liner over an area where a naturally-occurring hole in the sediment has exacerbated the leaching of elements. Such “slurry walls” have been used at landfills and Environmental Protection Agency Superfund sites to prevent contamination.

Until then, the Corps is also still investigating a public water option for the Pearce Creek communities, including possibly building a local water treatment plant or building a 7-mile pipeline from Cecilton to bring in treated water.

“We’ve had several conversations with Artesian Water and Aqua America Inc. about what our options might be and how the water might be supplied and billed,” Kelly said. “We’ve also talked to the county department of planning about what construction of a pipeline might entail. We’re really still exploring our options since we don’t get into the water business very often.”

Cecilton Mayor Joe Zang said Tuesday that the town and the Corps have met twice in the past month to discuss what would be needed for a pipeline, but the conversation has been mostly in “generalities” at this point.

The town’s water system, which draws from two wells in the Magothy aquifer, can currently produce a maximum of 386,000 gallons a day. Its tank could hold up to 400,000 gallons.

As of now, the town is permitted by the state to produce a maximum of 98,000 gallons of water a day, though it only produces about 50,000 on average.

The plan as previously discussed would build a pipeline from the western edge of the town out to Pond Neck Road and to the affected communities of West View Shores, Bay View Estates and possibly others. One meter at the end of town would record a bulk sale amount to the affected communities, as town officials stressed they would not want to bill individual customers. The pipeline would also be a denied-access line, meaning only the affected communities would be served, and homes along the pipeline could not hook into it.

In the meantime, the Corps is also drilling four test wells into the Upper Patapsco Deep aquifer on residential properties to test water quality of an aquifer possibly better protected from contamination. Elements of concern were detected in some residential wells above federal drinking water standards in the shallowest aquifers — the Magothy and Upper Patapsco Shallow — but not necessarily in the deeper aquifer.

“The water quality appeared to be good from the few readings we had in the USGS report,” he said.

All of these options are also largely contingent on the approval of federal funding for construction, Kelly said. Currently his department is still operating under a continuing resolution, which means only current projects are funded, and his \$6 million request for fiscal year 2014 has not yet been approved. The total cost of the slurry wall project was originally estimated at \$12 million.

The beginning of October also marked the beginning of the Corps’ work season, which runs until March 31, but for now it will only monitor shipping channels rather than dredge them.

“We’re going to try to avoid dredging the southern approach this year due to possible overloading of Poplar Island,” he said. “If the shoaling persists, though, then we’ll have to do some. We’ll take it to Poplar.”



Pearce Creek community meeting

Dan Sirkis, of the Army Corps of Engineers, answers questions from the public during a community meeting in May, where residents could ask state and federal officials questions as well as learn more about the issues.