Cecil County Council Questions Army Corps' Plans for Polluted Earleville Wells, New Dumping

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By Nancy Schwerzler

A majority of the Cecil County Council Tuesday questioned the handling of pollution of Earleville residents' water wells by a US Army Corps of Engineers dumpsite, with Councilor Joyce Bowlsbey (R-2) saying that local residents were "victims" of the Corps and state officials appeared to be "hellbent" on resuming dredge spoil dumping in the area regardless of the impact on local residents.

"I see them as victims," Bowlsbey said of the Earleville residents whose drinking water has been contaminated by the Corps dumpsite on Pond Neck Road. "They are not 'stakeholders'," she said. "They didn't ask for this."

Bowlsbey said it appeared to her, after attending a community meeting with Corps officials and leaders of the Maryland Port Administration (MPA) on Saturday at Bohemia Manor High School, that the state was "hellbent" on resuming dumping at the Pearce Creek site so as to protect the interests of the Port of Baltimore and continue dredging of sediment and spoils in shipping channels.

[SEE previous Cecil Times report on the community meeting with Corps and MPA officials here: http://ceciltimes.com/2013/03/army-dump-port-says-to-fix-polluted-cecil-county-wells-tied-to-renewed-dumping-in-earleville-pipkin-says-clean-up-first-then-talk-about-dumping/]

State environmental officials blocked further dumping at the Earleville site 20 years ago due to concerns about contamination of local residents' drinking water wells. In the interim, the Corps took no steps to clean up the pollution. However, the Corps recently proposed resumed dumping at the site, despite a new independent US Geological Survey study that concluded the Corps dump had penetrated aquifers and was responsible for polluting area residents' wells. And that pollution still persists today, despite the fact that there has been no new dumping at the site in 20 years.

The MPA and the Corps say they want to resume dumping in Earleville for the next 20 to 25 years and the Earleville site would be cheaper than any other alternative for disposal of dredging contaminants.

Bowlsbey said she had discussed the issue with some area residents who were concerned that the Cecil County Health Department was limiting its testing of local water to a small list of pollutants. She urged broader testing of water samples to monitor a wider array of possible contaminants.

Fred VonStaten, director of environmental health for the Cecil County Health Department, told Cecil Times that the agency was testing for five crucial chemicals—arsenic, beryllium, nickel, manganese and iron—under direction from the initial testing standards set by the US Geological Survey study of the dumpsite and adjacent communities. However, he added, since the USGS survey was published, the health agency has reviewed the findings and decided to ask area residents if they want their water to be tested for additional chemicals linked to radium. Residents would have to agree to add that level of testing to the basic reports provided by the health agency.

At the Saturday meeting, it was unclear which area communities would be deemed qualified for free health department testing of water samples. But VonStaten said that the health department would be generous in its interpretation of proximity to the Corps dumpsite. Apart from the most immediately impacted communities of West View Shores and Bay View Estates, he said Sunset Pointe and sections of Pond Neck Road would be automatically included. But some residents of Crystal Beach, although outside the immediate area of concern, were also approved for water testing.

One concern of local residents is that if they get free testing of their well water by the county Health Department, it would be a matter of public record, possibly preventing them from selling their homes. Indeed, documents provided at the Saturday meeting listed well testing results by individual property addresses. Some of those test results showed that even after private water treatment and filtration systems, homes still had high levels of arsenic and beryllium —significant health concerns.

County health officials said that, since the water tests were conducted by a government agency, the results and locations of the tests would be subject to public disclosure.

Councilor Diana Broomell (R-4), who attended the Saturday meeting on the dumpsite issue, insisted on Tuesday that a proposed letter to US Rep. Andy Harris (R-1), asking for a Council meeting to discuss various issues, should be expanded to include the Pearce Creek dumpsite and its impact on Earleville residents. Councilor Alan McCarthy (R-1), who also attended the community meeting, agreed. McCarthy has previously voiced concerns about the Corps' demand to resume dumping before all the environmental issues affecting local residents have been resolved.

County Council President Robert Hodge (R-5) said that he thought "most of the water degradation is not a health problem" in the area. "With a few exceptions," Hodge said, "it is still OK to drink." He encouraged area residents to submit their water to testing by the health department. (Only abut 31 wells in the affected communities have been tested, and of those several showed arsenic and other toxic chemicals even after individual homes' water system treatment.)

Meanwhile, one possible solution to the Earleville water problems might come from running a pipe from the town of Cecilton—which has excess capacity at its town-operated water system—about 8 miles to the West View Shores area.

Cecilton Mayor Joseph Zang told Cecil Times that, while he would need engineering studies to determine the fine points, it could be possible to run a water line from the town out to Earleville to serve the local communities affected by the Corps dumpsite.

Cecilton upgraded and expanded its municipal water system several years ago. It is rated for providing 386,000 gallons of water per day, although currently the town system holds permits to provide just 98,000 gallons. There is significant additional capacity available, and regulatory permits could readily be revised to serve additional communities.