

On-lot hookups underway in Pearce Creek communities

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Water service hookups are underway at Bay View Estates, a Pearce Creek-area neighborhood, with activation of service expected as early as next month.

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CECILTON — After years of planning and preparation, work has begun to hook up water service to several dozen homes in the communities bordering the Pearce Creek Dredge Material Containment Field (DMCF).

As early as September, residents of the communities may be able to turn their faucets on and receive water from Cecilton's wells 17 miles away, said Chris Rogers, of AECOM, the contracted engineering firm for the town.

More than four years after a U.S. Geological Survey report found that disposal of dredge spoils had degraded water quality in local wells, the residents of three Pearce Creek-area communities have been patiently awaiting a solution to their problem. For the past year they've been drinking bottled water after the U.S. Center for Disease Control expressed concerns that high manganese levels could have an effect on infants and young children.

The overarching plan developed by the Maryland Port Authority, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Maryland Department of the Environment, Maryland Department of Planning, the town of Cecilton and Cecil County seeks to seal the 260-acre Earleville DMCA site with a geosynthetic liner that would prevent leaching of naturally-occurring contaminants from dredge spoils into local water tables while also running a public water service line to the West View Shores, Bay View Estates and Sunset Pointe communities.

During a routine stakeholders' meeting Friday, Rogers noted that 209 of 235 access agreements for the on-lot hookup work have been returned, roughly 89 percent of the homes covered under the plan.

"There are three or four that we don't expect to get back," he noted, explaining that conversations are continuing with some who may believe they don't have to connect. "We have no plans to seek a court order to force ourselves onto anyone's property."

If a resident doesn't interconnect to the distribution system within one year of the water service's activation — an undetermined date that would likely fall in August or September 2018 — a resident would be responsible for the \$6,000 hookup fee that the state is currently funding for all complying residents. A noncompliant resident would also be unable to obtain residential permits for their property.

While there is no real estate code preventing the sale of a noncompliant property, officials noted that obtaining a mortgage for a property without potable water service where it's available may be an issue. Cecil County's livability code would also prevent a noncompliant property from being used as a rental, meaning property owners could be liable for enforcement.

Reybold, the primary contractor on the water service contract, expects to have two teams conducting on-lot work once the distribution system is declared to have potable water following testing that could occur as early as next week, Rogers said. While the exterior work has been completed at 30 homes, and nearly as many are ready to get underway, interior work will still be required to connect a home to the service line, he explained. Each of those projects takes about one day for a crew.

"We've made a priority to get to the full-time residents and now we're up against the snowbirds," he said. "We've also given priority to a few properties that have notified us that their well pump is on the verge of failure. We don't want to see people spend money needlessly on something that will be obsolete in a couple weeks."

In other news, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers also reported that monitoring wells in the DMCA have been drilled and surveyed, and monitoring tests of the wells are underway. Meanwhile, the Corps is reviewing comments made by the Maryland Department of the Environment on its discharge monitoring plan.

Gavin Kaiser, the Corps' C&D Canal project manager, also informed the residents that Pearce Creek Lake, a popular destination for fishermen and outdoorsmen, would not be reopened to the public until after the completion of the first dredging cycle. The Corps expects to dredge the C&D Canal and its approach channels this winter, disposing of spoils at Pearce Creek for the first time in about 20 years.

"The Corps has been in contact with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources to not reopen Pearce Creek Lake to the public in the interim, because of the liability issue for people's safety and the safety of contractors' equipment," he explained. "We expect to probably reopen it to the public starting next spring."