

FEATURED TOP STORY

Pearce Creek-area homes begin water hookups

By Jacob Owens jowens@cecilwhig.com Nov 24, 2017



Bill Haines, president of the Bay View Estates homeowners association, is among the several dozen homes in the Pearce Creek-area communities to recently be connected to public water.

CECIL WHIG PHOTO BY JACOB OWENS

EARLEVILLE — In the 10 years that Bill Haines has lived in Bay View Estates, a quiet waterfront neighborhood across the Chesapeake Bay from Turkey Point, he's never drank a drop of water that came from his faucet.

As one of three communities that border the Pearce Creek Dredge Material Containment Area, residents of Bay View Estates have long suspected that dredge spoils disposed of at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers site had degraded water quality. They often complained of high iron content that ruined clothes washed in it or stained vehicles washed with it. Most families utilized home treatment systems that cleaned water piped up from residential wells, costing thousands in maintenance, replacement water heaters and more over the years.

This week, however, Haines is among the roughly 60 residents of Bay View Estates, West View Shores and Sunset Pointe who are drinking public water for the first time in their lives.

"I think it actually tastes pretty good — a little backwash of chlorine taste but that may resolve with the system's calibration," he said. "We've been very happy with the results here."

More than four years after a U.S. Geological Survey report confirmed residents' suspicions — that disposal of dredge spoils had degraded water quality in local wells — a coalition of agencies is working to rectify the issue. Officials from 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 have all helped develop a plan to seal the 260-acre Earleville site with a geosynthetic liner that aims to prevent leaching of naturally-occurring contaminants from dredge spoils into local water tables while also running a public water service line to the 235 homes in the affected communities.

Some permitting delays led to on-lot hookups not starting until September, but with water now flowing to homes affected residents are able to stop receiving bottled water for consumption. In May 2016, the U.S. Center for Disease Control's Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry recommended that residents switch to drinking and cooking with bottled water due to concerns about the effect of high manganese levels on infants and young children. The coalition then began funding delivery of bottled water to the communities.

On Tuesday, Cecilton Mayor Joe Zang, who has been credited with approaching the communities with an offer of his town's water via a 14-mile pipeline, complimented the team that got the project this far.

"This is a unique undertaking, considering how far away it is," he said. "I couldn't ask for better folks to manage the process for us in (town engineering contractor) AECOM."

Haines, president of the Bay View Estates Homeowners Association, also complimented the plumbers and line crews doing the on-lot work, saying they've been professional, accommodating and clean.

The town still anticipates completing hookups in mid-summer 2018, Zang reported. Funding from the coalition for bottled water delivery is set to end on Sept. 8, 2018.

"We haven't gotten into the winter weather yet, so we don't know what that will bring," he said. "We had a little bit later than a start than we would have liked, but we're rolling now. I think we're on track and we have it down to a system now where they're doing one or two homes a day."

Residents who have been connected to Cecilton's system will pay the same rate that town residents at \$68.91 for the first 5,000 gallons and \$9.17 per 1,000 gallons after. The first quarterly billing for the new connections will be sent in January, with town hall staff working hard to prepare the new accounts.

Cecilton Town Administrator Mary Cooper said she understood the impact that the project was having after hearing of the residents' reactions from town contractors.

"One of our engineers told a resident that he needed to get some water from the home before he left and she offered him a bottle of water. He laughed and told her that he needed to get it from the tap," she recalled. "Another resident drank water from her tap for the first time and started to cry. She told our engineer that after living in her home for more than 20 years that was the first time she ever drank water from the tap."

Editor's note: This story originally reported that Pearce Creek-area residents would pay a different water rate than those who live in Cecilton. That is incorrect. They will pay the same rate. We regret the error.