

State Transpo Chief Boasts of Pressing Enviro Agency to OK Pearce Creek Dumpsite; New Railyard in Cecil Co linked to Commuter Trains to Elkton

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By [Nancy Schwerzler](#)

ELKTON—State transportation officials converged on Elkton on Tuesday 9/30/14 to outline state spending priorities in Cecil County, as Transportation Secretary Jim Smith boasted of multi-agency meetings to pressure for quick approval of an environmental permit to allow resumed shipping channel dredge spoil dumping at an Earleville site that has polluted local residents' drinking water wells.

“We’re setting deadlines,” Smith said, for a decision by the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) on issuing a permit for renewed dumping at the Earleville site. He said there would be “an announcement by November 21.” However, by state law, MDE has one year from the 7/1/14 date on which the US Army Corps of Engineers formally filed its application for a state water quality certification that is needed before shipping channel dredge spoils could be dumped at the Earleville site.

(Dumping at the Pearce Creek site in Earleville was barred over 20 years ago by MDE due to concerns over pollution of area aquifers that serve residential water wells. An independent federal study by the US Geological Survey issued in January, 2013, confirmed that the Corps dumpsite had polluted aquifers and local residents' water supply, including concentrations of arsenic and multiple other toxic pollutants.)

Smith, who was joined by senior state transportation officials for an annual meeting with Cecil County officials and members of the county's state legislative delegation, said that when he left that session he was headed to a meeting with Corps, Maryland Port Administration (MPA) and MDE officials on the dumpsite issue.

County Council President Robert Hodge (R-5) cautioned that local residents have until the end of October to submit formal comments to MDE on the water quality permit issue. Smith then backtracked a bit, saying that of course citizen comments would be reviewed, but then added, “We’re moving expeditiously.”

It was just a few days ago—on Saturday, 9/27/14—that Earleville residents had their first formal opportunity to address the dumpsite water quality permit issue at a public hearing convened by MDE. [SEE Cecil Times report here: <http://ceciltimes.com/2014/09/earleville-residents-demand-expedited-water-service-before-feds-resume-spoils-dumping-state-holds-enviro-hearing/>]

Smith said that the state transportation capital improvement budget is including “\$12 to \$15 million” for the proposed extension of a water pipeline from the town of Cecilton to serve the three Earleville communities (West View Shores, Bay View Estates, and Sunset Pointe) to provide a safe, clean water supply to residents whose wells have been polluted by the dumpsite. However, state documents supplied at Tuesday's Elkton meeting, including materials specific to Cecil County, did not list the Cecilton pipeline project as being formally allocated state transportation agency expenditures.

Hodge said that there should be deposits of the necessary funds for the water pipeline into an “escrow account” to assure local residents that “it’s a done deal so no one can pull the funding” from the Cecilton water line.

But the implicit political blackmail that has been stated by MPA officials repeatedly in the past—no state money for clean water to the Earleville residents unless the Corps and the Port get a permit from MDE to allow resumed dumping at Pearce Creek—was again evident at the state transportation meeting on Tuesday. In his opening statement, Secretary Smith stated that the funds for extending the Cecilton water pipeline to Earleville were “contingent on a water quality certificate” from MDE for renewed dredge spoil dumping in the area.

Commenting on the Pearce Creek issue, County Executive Tari Moore said, “When this is done, and I know it will be done,” there will be “kudos to everyone.”

Smith and several other state officials commended Cecilton town Mayor Joseph Zang for taking a leadership role on the problem, although the affected communities are over seven miles from his town, and for his work to conceive the idea to run a pipeline to the area and showing skeptical MPA, Corps and other officials that it was a viable option to serve the Earleville residents.

“I do want to thank Mayor Zang,” Secretary Smith said. “Without Mayor Zang and Cecilton, it couldn’t happen,” he added.

Meanwhile, state transportation officials urged support for the MARC commuter rail system's proposed rail car maintenance facility in Perryville. Although the site is located adjacent to the Northeast Corridor Amtrak rail line and is across the tracks from the IKEA warehouse facility that uses rail lines for cargo delivery, some distant residents have protested against the proposed facility to be located in the area.

But, as with the Pearce Creek dumpsite issue, state transportation officials indicated there was a political quid-pro-quo: support for the proposed rail car maintenance facility in Perryville if Cecil County wants to get its decades-long wish to extend commuter rail service to Elkton and beyond, to newly proposed rail hubs in Newark, DE.

State Sen. Steve Hershey (R-36) opposed that linkage, inquiring, “Why are they contingent on each other?” Hershey noted there is a 20-mile gap in commuter rail services—the only such gap in the northeast rail corridor—and “it’s the one piece that is missing.”

Hershey urged that there should be expedited planning between Maryland transportation officials and Delaware agencies, which are currently drafting plans for a major rail hub at Newark, with links to Amtrak and SEPTA (the Philadelphia commuter rail system.) Under questioning by Hershey, state officials said they were unsure if they were conducting talks with the regional commuter transit agencies, but would take steps to do so.