

Corps of Engineers tries to calm Pearce Creek fears with open house

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Residents of the Pearce Creek communities turned out in droves Saturday afternoon to an informational meeting hosted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers at the dredge material containment area in Earleville.

The event was just one of several such meetings that the communities of Bay View Estates, West View Shores, Sunset Pointe and residents of Pond Neck Road have had with officials from the Corps, Maryland Port Administration and Cecil County over the past five months.

In January, a long-awaited U.S. Geological Survey study concluded that decades of dredge spoil disposal by the Corps at the Pearce Creek site west of Cecilton had led naturally-occurring elements and metals, such as arsenic, beryllium, cadmium, thallium, and strontium, to leach into local groundwater at uncommonly high levels. That contamination has led to concerns among the communities about the quality of their well water, whether or not household treatment systems would remove these new found elements and whether or not the local environment would be remediated.

Dozens of residents came out to two tents set up at the entrance of the disposal area to learn more about the problem and possible solutions, and ask questions of the officials in charge of those decisions. The Corps has announced that it intends to rectify the current concerns and then reopen the Pearce Creek disposal site, which has been largely closed for close to 20 years, in order to keep the C&D Canal properly dredged. Alternative dumping sites have either been closed by the Maryland legislature, such as Poole's Island, or are too expensive to be used, such as Poplar Island, officials claim.

Tim Kelly, Corps project manager for the C&D Canal, said he was pleased with the turnout Saturday and the level of questions being asked. He added that the Corps was looking to make decisions on what solution to pursue at Pearce Creek by October.

Three different ideas are being discussed at the site including funding upgrades to resident's wells or home treatment systems, building a new self-contained water treatment plant to serve the communities or building a pipeline from Cecilton to tap into the town's water supply. Residents were mailed a six-page questionnaire on their preferences on the solutions, as well as their current water situation, with the intention of getting a better idea of what the majority of local residents want.

Duane Wilding, a senior engineer with the Maryland Environmental Service, a quasi-governmental non-profit working with the MPA on water solutions, presented a chart of estimated project costs at Saturday's open house. High estimations for a local treatment system varied between \$9 million and \$11 million, depending on whether or not to include fire hydrants, a 400,000-gallon reservoir and adequate water pressure for fire suppression in the communities — something the area currently lacks. Those solutions also carry an annual cost to users between \$1,000 and \$2,000 a year, according to Wilding's data. Estimations for the construction of a roughly 7-mile-long pipeline from Cecilton to the communities were between \$10 million to \$12 million, with an annual household cost of \$1,700 to \$2,000.

Connections to a public system or the pipeline would also require a one-time hook-up fee of several thousand dollars.

Also presented in the material were solutions to install residential water treatment systems, costing between \$300 and \$800 annually per home, and drilling deeper wells into aquifers with fewer issues, costing about \$200 to \$300 annually per home.

The central benefit of having a central system is that is regulated and tested annually at minimum. Jay Janney, an environmental specialist with MES, said the system would be tested monthly for bacteria, quarterly or annually for nitrates and for other elements on other occasions if concerning test results were found.

"Consumer confidence reports would be published and available to the public as well," Janney said, noting that he believed the local water was "altered" but not dangerous.

"It's just straight-up Maryland water," he said, noting that many of the elements in the USGS report are found in higher-than-normal levels naturally around the state.

Wilding said the Cecilton solution was "feasible from an engineering standpoint" and the operating and maintenance cost to users would likely be smaller due to a larger pool of users on the system. The town has offered to supply bulk water to the area, but voted to not be involved with the billing of Pearce Creek-area customers.

Along with the drinking water solution, officials are also examining measures to prevent future contamination of water tables, including 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



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Dan Sirkis, geo-environmental chief for the Corps' Philadelphia district, answers questions from the public during a community meeting Saturday afternoon, where residents could ask state and federal officials questions as well as learn more about the issues.

Environmental Protection Agency Superfund sites to prevent contamination, officials told residents.

“A lot of it will come down to funding,” Kelly said. “I've requested \$6 million in my fiscal year 2014 budget for the liner and slurry wall. The estimated total cost is about \$12 million.”

He noted that his total annual budget is between \$16 million and \$18 million, so this project will be taking on an enormous amount of his service area's budget, causing expense deferrals in other areas.

Among the throngs of attendees, Frank Hamons, MPA deputy director for harbor development, explained the vital importance of keeping the C&D Canal and approach channels dredged to a depth of 35 feet.

“A lot of our high-value cargo comes through the canal,” he said, noting that a lot of petroleum and European automobile import ships use the canal. “Of 4,000 port transits last year, 600 transits came through the canal. If we can't keep the canal dredged to a 35-foot depth, the concern becomes that shippers won't come to the Port of Baltimore or they'll pack ships much lighter to use the canal. But believe me, they don't like to leave cargo on the docks.”

The Maryland Port Administration also displayed a list of 23 Cecil County businesses that use the port for commerce, including IKEA, Michelin North America, General Electric, W.L. Gore & Associates, ISE America, Northeast Beverage Corporation, Plasticoid and more.

“If importers and exporters stop using the port because of the inconvenience, then money, economic impact and jobs will move with them,” Hamons said.

Cecilton Mayor Joe Zang was one of several public officials to attend the open house, including Cecil County Executive Tari Moore and County Councilwoman Diana Broomell, and he said he was surprised “at how fast the government was moving on this project.”

“People want to know what's going on down here and I think they're growing a little impatient,” he said. “Understanding the problem is the first step to solving it, so this was a good first step.”

Zang said the town had not received any updates from the Corps since approving a feasibility study of a Pearce Creek pipeline, but added the capacity did exist and cost of the project would be the deciding factor. Cecilton would only provide a source line to the edge of town limits, he said.

Saturday's crowd was a mix of residents who were looking for the Corps to fix the issues at the disposal area and leave Pearce Creek and those who were simply looking for dependable, clean drinking water. Attending the open house was resident Andrew Brown and his father, George, who has lived in West View Shores since 1961.

“We've always known the water was bad, so we've never drank it,” said Andrew, who lives on South Drive. “We probably drink or use about six gallons of bottled water a week. I constantly have to go to town to get water.”

Andrew said his family has never had their water tested before, because they don't drink the well water, but he was definitely getting it tested by the Cecil County Health Department now.

He added that they have also had to replace three water heaters in the past decade and four water softeners, which carry a cost of \$6,000 a piece, due to the low pH value of the water and high iron content. Andrew and George said they were in favor of the Cecilton pipeline solution to ensure water quality.

Andrew added that he never wanted to move from his home, where his family has always enjoyed the way of life, private beaches and a boat ramp.

“I want (the Corps) to take care of us first,” he said.