

# Pearce Creek solution taking shape, officials aim to reopen dredge site

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EARLEVILLE — Nearly a year after a U.S. Geological Survey report confirmed that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' disposal of dredge spoils contaminated the local water tables for nearby residents, a solution seems to be taking form, according to officials closely involved in the negotiations.

For months, federal, state and local officials have been negotiating the best way to rectify the degraded water quality for residents in communities surrounding the Pearce Creek Dredge Material Containment Area off Pond Neck Road. Several options were considered, including drilling deeper residential wells for residents and building a standalone water treatment plant, but officials on all sides are now moving toward building a pipeline from Cecilton, roughly seven miles away, to bring public water to residents of the Sunset Pointe, Bay View Estates and West View Shores communities.

"It's not a done deal, but (the pipeline) is one option that we're discussing at length," Dave Blazer, the Maryland Port Administration's interim director for harbor development, said last week. "There are still some hoops to jump through; we're exploring what the potential cost might be and what the project would entail."

Blazer did concede, however, that "(the pipeline) is the direction we're moving toward."

The MPA is intimately interested in fixing the water quality issues in the community, so that the Pearce Creek DMCA may be reopened for dredge spoil disposal in the near future. Sites to dump the muddy spoils are dwindling around the state, and the Earleville site has 25 years of capacity remaining, but has been closed for nearly 20 years following residents' complaints. Routine dredging of approach channels, especially those at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay as well as the C&D Canal, are important to ensure large vessels can continue to come to the Port of Baltimore.

Cecil County District 1 Councilman Alan McCarthy, who represents the Earleville area and has been negotiating the water solution with state and federal officials, recently called the Cecilton pipeline the "most possible or likely solution."

"(MPA) is going to pay for the project, but they don't have the funding identified yet," he said, referring to conversations he has had with officials over the past two to three weeks. "Current residents will not have to pay a hook-up fee to tap into the public water if they do so immediately. If they wait a period of time, however, and then decided to do so, there will likely be a fee."

McCarthy added that drilling new wells had also been discussed, but he believes that even the deeper aquifers in the area appear to have been contaminated to some degree and officials aren't certain they could reliably get good water quality by drilling.

The councilman also said the Maryland Department of the Environment's approval of a water quality certificate for the dredge site will likely be tied to the public water solution.

"If the Corps cannot reopen Pearce Creek for spoils, (the pipeline) will not happen" McCarthy said. "The MPA will want some some assurances that the disposal site will be reopened."

The timeline for reopening of the site will also likely be ahead of completion of the public water access.

"The port and the Corps want to start using Pearce Creek in the fall 2015," McCarthy said. "The (pipeline) won't be completed, but it will be 'well underway' according to discussions."

Cecilton Mayor Joe Zang said Wednesday that while he hasn't received word that a pipeline will be funded, the process to build one would be lengthy.

"You have design, engineering, permitting and easements before you can do any actual construction," he said of the project, for which initial estimates cite a cost of \$12.5 million to \$13 million. "I'd hope that we could start at both ends to expedite construction."

The town's water system, which draws from two wells in the Magothy aquifer, can currently produce a maximum of 386,000 gallons a day. Its tank could hold up to 400,000 gallons.

As of now, the town is permitted by the state to produce a maximum of 94,000 gallons of water a day, though it only produces about 55,000 on average, Zang said. He added the town would have to apply to the state to draw additional water in order to produce the roughly 50,000-55,000 gallons needed to supply the Pearce Creek home.

The plan as previously detailed would build a pipeline from the western edge of the town out to Pond Neck Road and to the affected communities. The pipeline would also be a denied-access line, meaning only the affected communities would be served, and homes along the pipeline could not hook into it.



Pearce Creek

Federal, state and local officials are working to seal the Pearce Creek Dredge Material Containment Area in Earleville, seen here, and provide public water to nearby residents.

“I think this is a tremendous opportunity to solve a major problem,” Zang said. “When you consider that a project like this requires federal, state, county and municipal officials to work together, it is commendable how far we’ve come.”

Meanwhile, the Corps said this week it is preparing a revised proposal to seal the disposal site after its initial proposal to place a 30-acre linear and install a slurry wall between the site and communities was denied by MDE. In order to reopen the site for spoil depositing, the Corps will have to prove to MDE that new contaminants are not leaching into groundwater.

An Oct. 21 recommendation letter from MDE to the Corps said the geology of the area would move the contaminated water to areas away from the slurry wall. It also added that other approved slurry wall projects contained mechanisms to remove contaminated leachate, which the Corps’ proposal did not include.

“The long-term results of adopting the Corps’ proposal will result in continued generation of high TDS, high iron, low pH, high sulfate, high manganese, high aluminum leachate, with associated trace metals that will also mobilize naturally occurring radionuclides above drinking water standards, that will not be fully contained or controlled within the site boundaries, which is not acceptable,” the letter read. “It should be clear to all parties at this time that there is no potential for a future water quality certification for the Pearce Creek DMCA without addressing the water supply needs of the existing impacted homeowners in a manner acceptable to the Department.”

Tim Kelly, the Corps’ C&D Canal project manager, said Tuesday that it was preparing a new proposal — which they hope to submit to the state early next year — to place a liner across the entire 260-acre disposal site. He said the Corps understood MDE’s concerns, “but we were looking at the issues slightly different than their engineers did.”

Currently his department is still operating under a continuing resolution, which means only current projects are funded, and his \$6 million request for fiscal year 2014 has not yet been approved. The estimated cost of placing a liner is between \$12 million and \$14 million, though his \$6 million request will be able to be transferred to a new project proposal, Kelly said.

He said the process to lay down the liner would take eight months to a year, and include clearing and grubbing the site. The Corps is currently looking at two types of liner: one is a high-density polyethylene panel liner welded together to be impervious and the other uses a geo-synthetic clay liner, Kelly said.

Last week, McCarthy also met with representatives from the affected communities and compiled some of their other quality-of-life concerns, including better mosquito control if spoils are again deposited in the area, the planting of fast-growing trees to create a natural barrier to the DMCA and agreements to repair homeowners’ association roads potentially damaged by Corps vehicles. Those concerns were then sent to MPA officials, McCarthy said.

Bill Haines, president of the Bay View Estates homeowners’ association, said the local community has met at least four times with Port and Corps officials since the spring. All in all, he said he believes residents would be satisfied with the pipeline as a public water solution.

“The port gets to use the dredge site for 25 years and we get clean water,” he said last week. “It’s not the best deal, but if this is what it has to be, so be it.”