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*'It's going to change the whole complexion of the North End of New Bedford.'*

BARRY STARR, *environmental activist*

## New Bedford waterfront to get \$145m cleanup

By Scott Allen  
GLOBE STAFF

Federal officials this week plan to detail a \$145 million proposal to remove heavily contaminated sediments from the bottom of the Acushnet River in New Bedford, a cleanup that would clear the way for the city to reclaim the North End's waterfront after decades of industrial pollution.

The cleanup plan, delayed four years by wrangling over the Environmental Protection Agency's previous proposal to incinerate the most contaminated sediments, calls for 450,000 cubic yards of toxic sediments to be dredged from the river and placed in giant plastic-lined containers along the riverbank.

After the sediments settle, the containers will be covered with impermeable material such as clay, allowing the city to put recreation areas and possibly a marine terminal on top of them.

"We have come a long way from the kind of confrontational situation we had with their insistence on incineration," said City Council president George Rogers, who led the 1993 fight against the incinerator plan despite threats of a \$25,000-a-day fine. "Incineration is not on the table."

The 170 acres of sediment that would be pulled from the river under the EPA's new plan were never scheduled to be burned. But the uproar over the proposal to burn some highly contaminated sediments forced the agency to shelve the 1992 dredging plan.

"Everyone was so focused on the incinerator

### EPA plan would dredge contaminated sediment from Acushnet River

that we decided it would be better to wait," said EPA spokeswoman Kristen Conroy.

Now, the EPA has essentially canceled the incinerator, which would have burned about five acres of sediments known locally as the "hot spots." These hot spots are believed to contain the highest underwater concentration of toxic polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, in the world.

Instead of incineration, the EPA is testing new treatments for the hot spot sediments, now waiting in a plastic-lined storage container on Sawyer Street. Later this month, Eco Logic of Michigan will see if it can chemically neutralize the PCBs with a pressure cooker-like device.

The new dredging proposal, the result of two years of negotiations between activists and federal, state and local officials, completes a remarkable turnaround from the battles of 1993 when EPA and the city were at each other's throats.

The incinerator battle attracted national attention when the National Law Journal listed the cleanup project as an example of the EPA showing less concern for hazardous waste sites in neighborhoods with large minority populations. The North End has a large Portuguese-American population, including many people with limited English-speaking ability.

Though EPA officials vehemently rejected charges of "environmental racism," the agency reversed course on the incinerator after briefly going to court to force the city to accept the incinerator. Since late 1993, the EPA, other government agencies and activists have worked with a mediator to find common ground on the cleanup.

The dredging plan, which will be officially unveiled Wednesday at New Bedford Vocational Technical High School, includes several changes from the 1992 plan to address local worries.

The EPA agreed to remove even more contaminated sediment than it originally proposed in 1992. In addition, the agency agreed not to put the dredged material in a lagoon where osprey and other wildlife congregate. Instead, EPA contractors will put the material in four massive in-ground containers that can one day be built over.

Now, instead of community fear that pollution from the incinerator would be worse than the Superfund site it was supposed to clean up, residents of the North End are optimistic that they may be able to use the waterfront again after years of health warnings to stay away.

In fact, Rogers is leading a campaign to develop a riverfront recreation area next to what would have been the incinerator site. Using some of the \$21 million that the river's polluters put into a trust for environmental projects, Rogers wants to build a marina and other public amenities.

"It's going to change the whole complexion of the North End of New Bedford," said Barry Starr of the anti-incinerator group Hands Across the River, referring to the river cleanup.

