

# Varied views, but d

## Roundtable members divided on approach, united in optimism

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** On Sept. 13, The Standard-Times hosted the first in a series of roundtable sessions to discuss the Superfund cleanup of New Bedford Harbor, one of the nation's most complex hazardous waste sites.

During the two-hour discussion, five participants reviewed what has been accomplished so far and what remains to be done.

They talked candidly about some of their disagreements — they're divided about how to approach the next stage of the New Bedford Harbor Superfund site cleanup, for example.

But each of the them also expressed optimism that those differences can be worked out and that the harbor will eventually be cleaned.

Those who participated in the session included:

■ **David Dickerson**, the Environmental Protection Agency's project manager of the New Bedford Superfund site.

■ **Molly Fontaine**, environmental planner for the city of New Bedford.

■ **Michael Keating**, facilitator for meetings of the New Bedford Forum assigned by the state's Office of Dispute Resolution.

■ **Jim Simmons**, president of Hands Across the River Coalition, a grassroots environmental group.

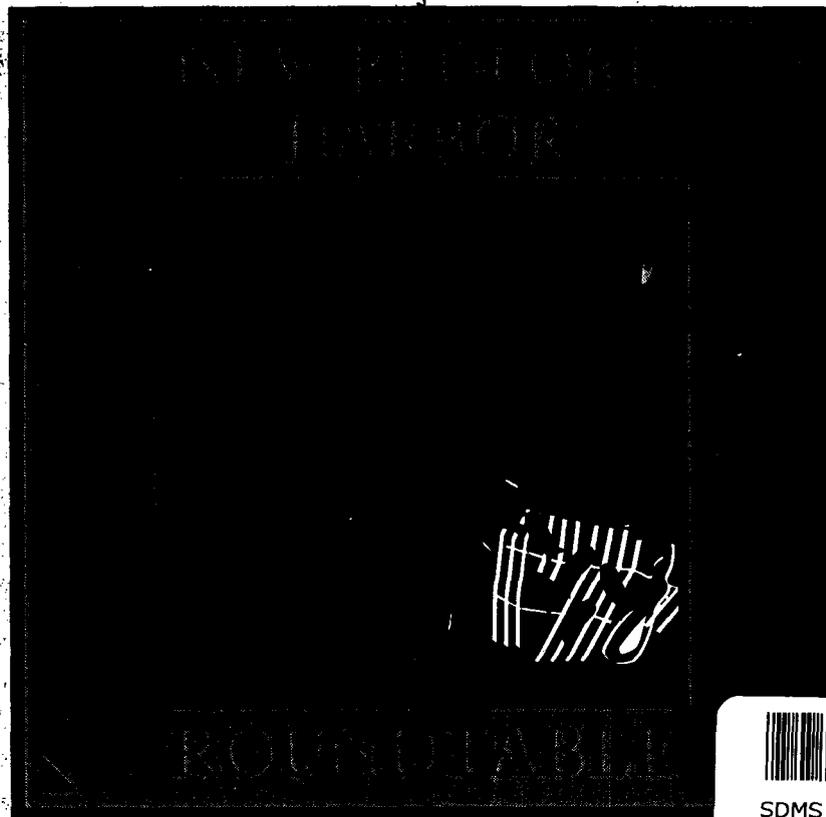
■ **Elsie Souza**, an aide to U.S. Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass.

Below are descriptions of the topics addressed during the meeting and excerpts of that discussion.

Some of the highest levels of polychlorinated biphenyls in the country — 200,000 parts per million — have been found here in the mud of New Bedford Harbor. The average PCB contamination in the so-called hot spots — five acres of the most severely polluted areas — is between 20,000 and 30,000 parts per million. Mr. Dickerson was asked to put those numbers in perspective.

**Mr. Dickerson:** "Perhaps the best example to put these levels into context is the risk assessment studies have shown that 50 ppm is a level that we can live with from a human health standpoint."

In addition to PCBs, which the federal government considers a probable



was a recognized 'devil out there' (incineration) that everybody could beat up on and everybody disliked and could attack. In Phase 2, where you're talking about a process that's 'forever,' that's a long time, that's hard to quantify, hard to measure and hard to pinpoint what the real danger and risks are ...

"It's hard to get your arms around in terms of a problem and of understanding what some of the long-term ramifications are for the city and the state and the EPA as an agency. And all of that's coming at a time of political turmoil where the future of the agency and the future of funding, the future of Superfund is all subject to a lot of confusion and uncertainty ...

"I think in many ways it's going to be more problematic than Phase 1. We're just beginning to come to grips with that Phase 2. There's dis-

basis of a lot of study, to announce that decision, and then defend it before the public. I think the decision (to incinerate PCBs from the hot spots) had been made after a lot of study by the agencies. Because the decision itself was one that took a lot of time to implement to translate from the drawing board to reality, it left a long period of time during which more and more people looked at the proposed solution and became more and more uncomfortable with it ...

"People wanted to re-look at it and the agencies were reluctant to do that because they had spent a lot of time and money ensuring themselves that what they thought was the best scientific and technological answers to a problem, that became, for reasons that had very little to do



human cancer-causing chemical, the harbor and river are also full of heavy metals — including chromium, copper, cadmium and lead. Mr. Dickerson described the threat posed by those substances and how some of them will be removed as part of the cleanup process.

**Mr. Dickerson:** "The metals are also a big problem. Fortunately, when we dig up sediments for Phase II we will also dig up the most contaminated sediments from the heavy metals standpoint. The metals do pose a risk to the ecosystem but they're kind of dwarfed by the risks posed by the PCBs."

*Mr. Dickerson was asked to describe how much of the cleanup has been completed and what remains to be done.*

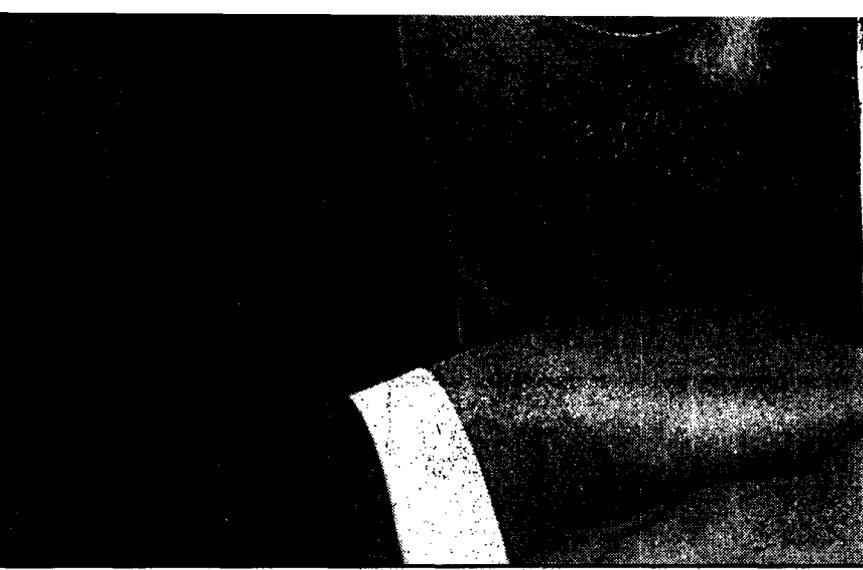
**Mr. Dickerson:** "Just last week (Sept. 6) we finished the dredging portion of the hot spots. That entails removing about 13,000 to 14,000 cubic yards of the most contaminated sediments in the upper Acushnet River and pumping them to a secure holding facility on Sawyer Street. What remains for that part of the job is continuing the quest for an alternative technology to incineration. That entails a number of different things. The most immediate project is a treatability study that is under way now. It's a multimillion-dollar study to pilot test small scale versions of treatment technologies to see what technology is best suited for the hot spots.

"As far as what remains for the rest of the harbor, the most immediate goal is trying to finalize decision-making for what we call ROD2 (record of decision 2) of the second phase of dredging for the whole harbor ...

"We propose to dredge sediments, pump them to CDFs, similar to what we did for the hot spots but on a much greater scale. There would be the same process of de-watering the sediments, draining the water off and running that water through treatment. But there would not be the physical step of running all those 500,000 cubic yards of sediments through some kind of treatment process."

*The New Bedford Forum, a group that grew from citizens opposition to the Environmental Protection Agency's plan to incinerate material dredged from the Hot Spots, is now discussing the second phase of the New Bedford Harbor Superfund site cleanup and it's obvious some forum members are opposed to the EPA's plan to deposit dredge sediments on CDFs constructed on the banks of the river. Mr. Keating, the forum's facilitator, discussed how the group's members would attempt to resolve their differences.*

*Mr. Keating:* "In Phase I there



**Michael Keating, facilitator for the meetings of the New Bedford level of the discussions.**

quietude clearly. People are concerned about these CDFs forever built on the shore of the harbor. But what are the alternatives?

*Mr. Keating and Mrs. Souza of Rep. Frank's office said all parties learned lessons in the days prior to the formation of the forum, during the often bitter fight over the incineration issue. They learned that a grassroots community group can take on a federal agency and make them reverse what appeared to be an irreversible decision. They also learned that by listening to opposing viewpoints, their convictions could change and agreements could be reached where none appeared possible.*

**Mrs. Souza:** "This was David and Goliath as I, who grew up here, had never seen ... (she said, referring to the grassroots fight against EPA's incineration plan).

"It was truly amazing to see these people who ... stood up to an agency and said to the government officials — Congressman Frank and (Edward) Kennedy and (John) Kerry, to the mayor of the city, to the selectmen — this is not going to happen. We are not going to incinerate

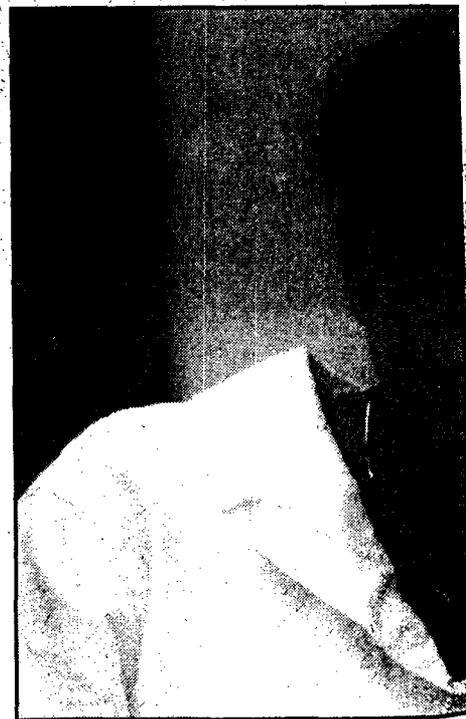
"I was very proud of what I saw ... I often thought it was the coming-of-age of this community, where there was a sophistication I have never seen here before at all, saying to the government: 'This is our community. We're not going to let you do what we feel is not right.' And an agency backing off ... To see the forum process has been an incredible experience."

**Mr. Keating:** "The traditional approach of the agencies at both the state and federal level typically in this kind of a process is to make a decision about what to do on the

with the science and technology directly, became unimplementable. It became politically unacceptable to the local community.

"... (Everyone) involved in the process (was) looking for some way out of it, (they) sought to create a process in which everybody with something at stake in the situation could get around a table and try and talk through what the issues were and what the problems were and see if some sort of consensus could emerge relative to what the correct resolution of this seemingly intractable problem might be. That's how the Forum came to be.

"I think the respect among the members of the Forum has grown enormously. There's a willingness to



**Molly Fontaine, environmental planner, sees satisfactory solutions as t**

# Desire to cooperate

listen and to sometimes, believe it or not, be persuaded by what other folks say. That has made life a lot more comfortable. It also means that you have in this community a group of citizens, of politicians and of technocrats who deal with the issue that have reached a level of education that is simply unparalleled.

"People came in pretty far apart. They were pretty sure there would not be agreement ....

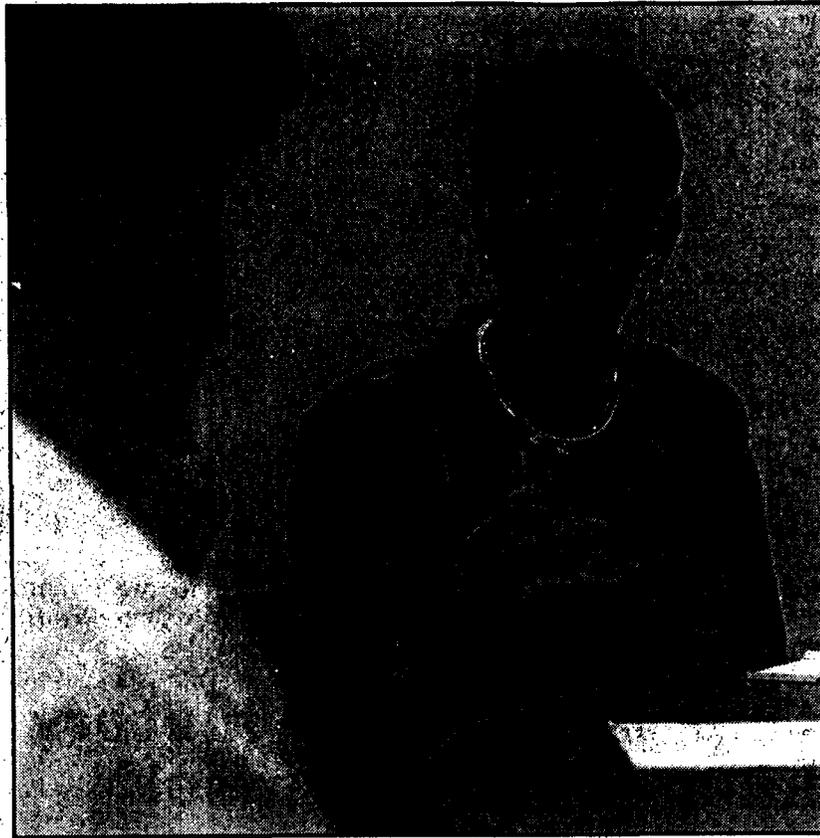
"But when you get people together and begin to explore what's really important to them and what's really critical to them, and are there some different ways of doing it, I think we found in Phase 1 that there were some different ways. There was willingness on the part of the agencies and on the part of the citizens to look at some of those things. I'm amazed at how these things start out with people saying no way and then finding a way. That's what's happened here in Phase 1."

*The Environmental Protection Agency has looked at a number of options for dealing with the material dredged as part of the second phase of the cleanup and continues to believe storing that material in riverfront CDFs is the best option. Mr. Dickerson said the agency is, however, willing to take suggestions from the New Bedford Forum and perhaps incorporate them in its proposed remedy.*

Mr. Dickerson: "There are a number of other options that were looked at in detail ....

"There is what we call the minimal action alternative where we just watch it. We don't do anything except monitor it over time and see if nature takes care of itself in a couple hundred years or whatever. Obviously it's not very attractive to a lot of people. Other than that, you do start to get into options that do involve CDFs of one type or another ....

"... I have to add that cost is not the only issue. What advantage or



Elsie Souza, aide to Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., sees hope in the way area residents have banded together to seek solutions.

*steadfastly opposed to the Environmental Protection Agency's plans. The EPA intends to store untreated, dredged material in riverfront lagoons known as combined disposal facilities — or CDFs.*

Ms. Fontaine: "The city is faced with the problem of disposal of maintenance dredging material ....

*(Members of a New Bedford Forum Subcommittee are discussing the possibility of disposing of material from navigational dredging as part of the New Bedford Harbor Superfund cleanup. EPA officials have said such a disposal program may be workable.)*

"We're kind of stuck between a rock and a hard place. We need to get the dredging going. We need to get it completed. It's likely that in the next several years sediment levels will be such that we'll have to turn away more ships.

... We also have some serious concerns about CDFs ... It seems as though putting them in CDFs is certainly a good approach, but we're going to be faced with angry residents not wanting them in their back yard. We also are concerned with the long-term maintenance of the CDFs, the long-term monitoring. What will happen if and when funding runs dry? What exactly will the state be doing? What will the city be doing?

is not true of this phase."

*None of the participants believe their differences are insurmountable, however. And Mr. Dickerson said the EPA's proposal to use long-term CDFs during the cleanup's second stage could be altered.*

Mr. Dickerson: "It's not set in stone. Our whole goal here is to avoid the problems of Phase 1 so that we build some public consensus. Jim's right, there are a limited set of options. We could leave it alone and monitor it. We could cap the sediments in place. We could consider treating the sediments with a number of different technologies. But those really still involve CDFs because we still have half a million cubic yards of treated material that you have to put someplace."

*Mr. Simmons wondered whether the EPA could treat the sediments to be stored in CDFs closest to residential neighborhoods, such as at the foot of Sawyer Street?*

Mr. Simmons: "I haven't heard any opposition to that. Everyone I've polled about that says as long as it's treated, it's fine."

Mr. Keating: "One thing you have to keep sight of here is time is against us but it's on our side, as well. That's one of the things that made possible



Staff photos by Mika Valeri

Forum, helps maintain the high

benefit does treatment of that material give you as opposed to CDFs? We really think that the advantages are very minimal given that the CDFs are very secure. They leak very minimally. They have been studied extensively. Our crystal ball isn't any better than anybody else's. But we do think it's a very good remedy ... We understand CDFs aren't a perfect remedy for everybody. But it's an imperfect world and we have a huge problem to deal with. There are a lot of advantages to CDFs."

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Participants said efforts to come to an agreement on how to proceed with the second phase may be difficult as some forum members are



anner for the city of New Bedford taking many more years.

... It's a multi-faceted issue. It's not just whether or not to have CDFs. It's where? How? How big?"

Mr. Keating: "If someone is going to build a CDF in my back yard, then I don't want it there. I think that's fairly common. The issue for the community as a community is, what does it cost us? What are the implications for us now and for the long term? What are the costs of not doing it? What are the costs of doing something else, and is there something else that we can do?"

Mr. Simmons: "... What I hear is *deja vu*, period."

Mr. Dickerson: "You make the point that it was the citizens that came up with alternatives to incineration ... that we were so stupid that we didn't know any other alternatives. That's just not the case. Don't kid everybody. EPA is pilot-studying the same alternatives now that we pilot-studied a number of years ago. We know the alternatives are there. The reason EPA was so against backing off of incineration was because the momentum and time and public money spent to get to a point to where we (were) ready to clean up those hotspots."

Mr. Simmons: *Mr. Simmons added that he was concerned that the EPA, in the face of possible budget cutbacks, couldn't guarantee they'd continue to monitor the performance of CDFs forever.*

"Even if the EPA says yes, we will monitor and no matter what government we have — Democrat or Republican or independent — we have to live with the decisions that our policy-makers make. If these policies go into effect, they will effectively tell you what you want to do you aren't going to be able to do whether you wanted to or not. So that leaves us with CDFs that can't be monitored properly the way you want, because the policy-makers in Washington say you don't have to do that... That leaves the general public again at risk."

Mrs. Souza: "... Yes, EPA is on the firing line as is every other federal agency as we speak. However, you have political savvy on the part of the people in this area ... Barney would be the first one to tell you it's his responsibility to make sure that this federal issue continues to be addressed.

"On a very personal note, I lost my son to cancer last November. He was 26. I don't know why he died. No one can tell me why. I don't know if he was one of the products of a harbor that wasn't cleaned ... I tell you very candidly, I'm just as concerned as anybody sitting at this table.

"Jim, I know where you're coming from, but I think Phase 1 was worse. Sitting at this table, there was no one speaking to one another. That

one of the things that went by, other forms of technology begin to emerge. We begin to understand more about them and we know more about them."

Mr. Keating: "Jim, the suggestion then is the possibility of whatever the treatment comes out of Phase 1 is using that treatment for at least part of Phase 2, not all of the half million cubic yards of it, but for part of it, particularly in that area that is either restorable or close to citizens residential areas, and do something else with another piece of it."

Mr. Simmons: "I think that would alleviate a lot of the problems that the citizens have, if something like that was to even be looked at."

Mr. Keating: "I think it's a very interesting possibility."

Mrs. Souza: "I think that we will solve those problems. There will be something found. I think the Forum will emerge with an answer."

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*In closing, each of the meeting's participants responded to a question posed by Ken Hartnett, editor of The Standard-Times: "Are we going to get a clean harbor here in New Bedford and, if so, when will it happen?"*

Mr. Keating: "Well the first part is easy. Yes. When? It's going to take you a decade, at least."

Mrs. Souza: "I'll be retired from Barney Frank's office. It is such a long process. But the miracle is that this issue was even addressed. Mr. Simmons: "In closing I'd like to say in all honesty the best thing the EPA ever did in this Superfund in the city of New Bedford is to put this man down here (Mr. Dickerson). That's the best thing they ever did. Because if he wasn't here right now, we'd be back out there rallying again, and you might even have people getting locked up. He's cordial and is patient. Will this harbor get cleaned? Yes."

Ms. Fontaine: "I think it's going to be a very long process. There are so many issues to get this harbor clean, it's going to be a very long process."

Mr. Dickerson: "I would agree with Michael (Keating) from the Superfund standpoint. It will probably take 10 years for the dredging to happen. It's an urban, working harbor and there are plenty of other sources (of pollution) there that can be addressed over time. The man on the street has an increasingly better understanding of what it takes to keep an ecosystem clean and, hopefully, that's where it has to happen, with the next generation, to not dump the used oil, to develop technologies, industrial-related technologies that have fewer and fewer contaminants coming out of the end of the pipe. It took a long time for this harbor to get the way it is and it is going to take a long time to get it back."