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Can two dredging projects be linked?

Editor's note: On Tuesday The Standard-Times hosted the second in a series of roundtable meetings to discuss the Superfund cleanup of New Bedford Harbor.

During that session, the participants discussed whether navigational dredging of the harbor can be done in conjunction with the planned Superfund dredging.

It would be the first time two such projects have been linked, participants said.

The advantages? Navigational dredging materials could be disposed of as part of the Superfund remedy. The material — which would be very difficult to get rid of otherwise because of its low levels of contamination — could be used as a cap to cover more seriously contaminated Superfund dredging.

Such a plan might also garner much-needed support for the Environmental Protection Agency's proposal to store contaminated dredged materials in lagoons, or combined disposal facilities, along the banks of the Acushnet River and harbor.

And at least one of those at Tuesday's meeting warned the group to proceed with caution, as delays encountered by one of the projects could seriously hamper the other's progress.

Yet all agreed the idea is intriguing, and deserving of further exploration.

Those who participated in Tuesday's meeting included:

■ Maurice Beaudoin, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' resident engineer for the New Bedford Harbor Superfund cleanup.

■ Marty Manley, director of the City of New Bedford's Harbor Development Commission.

■ Deerin Babb-Brott, regional planner for Massachusetts Coastal Zone Management.

■ Peg Brady, director of Massachusetts Coastal Zone Management.

■ Ed O'Donnell of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers navigational division.

■ State Rep. William M. Straus, D-Mattapoisett.

■ Capt. Michael H.M. Taylor, vice president of the Maritime Terminal.

Here are excerpts from Tuesday's discussion.

The New Bedford Harbor Superfund site contains some of the highest levels of PCB contamination ever found in the country. Earlier this fall, the five acres containing the highest levels of contamination — the so-called hot spots — were dredged. Now the federal government is contemplating dredging some lesser contaminated areas as the next stage of cleanup. Mr. Beaudoin was asked to describe the government's plans.

Mr. Beaudoin: *"(It will) require the dredging of about a half million cubic yards of the contaminated sediment within the upper estuary and a few hot spots south of the bridge.... The decision by EPA hasn't been signed yet."*

As part of their proposed remedy for the New Bedford Superfund site, the EPA wants to store dredged material in CDFs. However, staunch opposition has already surfaced, and that may push back the next phase of the harbor cleanup.

Mr. Beaudoin: *"A lot depends on the situation within the City of New Bedford as to what will occur with the CDFs. That could delay decisions, as far as dredging, for up to five years, if not longer."*

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The last time the city's harbor was dredged was in the 1950s. In the years since, the harbor has become increasingly shallow.

Mr. O'Donnell: "New Bedford's authorized to 30 feet...that was the depth (that) was economically justified...To get the main ship channel and other areas back to authorized depths you have to dredge about a million yards of material. We have a survey crew working in the harbor right now. I've seen some areas that are about 25 feet, and some areas may be less... We had looked at just dredging areas that really are the critical problems and we could probably get it down to about 500,000 yards of material."

Mr. Manley of the city's Harbor Development Commission and Capt. Taylor described the port's limitations.

Mr. Manley: "The harbor is very limited as far as ocean-going cargo vessels go. Not so much for the fish-

ing industry and recreational vessels, but for ocean-going cargo, it is definitely limited. There are limits as to the types of vessels we can go after to try to market them to come in and use New Bedford as a port of call."

Capt. Taylor: "In order to keep this place going, of course, you have to do marketing. The first question you get asked when you try to market an import program is 'What draft do you have for our ships?' We have to tell them right now we have 26 feet, and that's at high water... We've lost two ships this year for draft. They had to go to Philadelphia. (Capt. Taylor estimated each vessel that docked in Philadelphia means a \$150,000 loss for the local economy. He also said that the fishing industry and yacht repair businesses also stand to suffer.) One thing that we must not forget is that this is a commercial port. If you stop commerce, you seriously effect the workings of this city. That's the priority, whether it be marinas, fishing fleets or ships coming in from around the world. It creates employment. If you don't do something, if you laugh about it, close those gates right up front and

you build a parking lot, because that's what is going to happen."

Rep. Straus chairs a subcommittee looking into combining the two dredging projects for The New Bedford Forum, a panel of federal, state and local representatives working together on the Superfund process. He described why linking the two makes sense.

Rep. Straus: "...These kinds of projects are, by their nature, they become permitting nightmares... Any state has the opportunity in responding to a suggested record of decision to recommend, if it wants to pay for it, an enhanced remedy. The enhanced remedy that we are looking to push the EPA into is some mea-

sure of the navigational dredging, so the maintenance dredging becomes part of the technical cleanup remedy under the Superfund law.

What that does is, if it's part of the EPA remedy as I say, I think it avoids some of the separate permitting issues... That speeds things up and costs less."

Mr. Babb-Brott of coastal Zone Management said delays to dredging projects often come because of citizen concerns over disposal.

Mr. Babb-Brott: "The permitting process is typically not pointy-headed, sharp-toothed people running around with nothing better to do than delay dredging projects. It's often a function of helping or facilitating the community to accept the disposal site, which is a time-consuming process. The permitting process is just a name for finding a home for that. Ultimately a home for that is determined by the community."

Ms. Brady of Coastal Zone Management said the two projects could be combined, but officials should use

caution.

Ms. Brady: "...This is clearly a project that is going to require a tremendous amount of partnership and cooperation on all levels... It is a unique opportunity and we shouldn't shun this opportunity, but there are still many unanswered issues... How these projects move together is critical. If one does bog down, it may affect the other. I think we're focusing in on the navigational project, but the question in my mind is, by linking it to the Superfund project, do we run the risk of bogging down the navigational dredging project?"

Participants said federal money will pay for the dredging of the federal channel. The Seaport Bond bill

would provide additional funds to pay for dredging of other publicly owned areas in need of deepening. Dredging in private areas will require other sources of funding. Rep. Straus updated the bill's progress in the Legislature.

Rep. Straus: "It is one of three major bond bills that are over at the Senate that I think there are a lot of people pushing to have the Senate act on... Whether they come out (this session) I'm not sure."

Before officials can seriously address the idea of linking the two projects, local leaders must make such a proposal.

Rep. Straus: "The city and the town of Fairhaven probably should make that request to a lot of different people. If it's a linked project, there isn't a real game plan to go by, so they make their request to everybody they can think of, to the governor, to CZM, to DEP, the EPA, the Army Corps of Engineers, to cover everybody. Then...it is for the state in some document to find in the Superfund law to request an enhanced remedy. Everything builds from that local input. Then the EPA is charged with coming up with a record of decision. At that level it hinges on a consensus of some kind. It doesn't necessarily mean unanimity but it does need consensus of some kind on a cleanup remedy. That's a ticklish thing right now."

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Mr. Manley said a newly rejuvenated committee would be making the dredging issues its top priority.

Mr. Manley: "The Harbormaster Planning Committee has every intention of taking a lead role in this. It entails all waterfront people on the New Bedford side and almost all waterfront people on the Fairhaven side who have an interest on the waterfront. We're trying to get this thing speeded up as quickly as we can."

The participants offered these predictions about whether the Superfund and navigational dredging might be married, and when dredging would be completed.

Mr. Beaudoin: "I would say that of all the projects I've worked on, this one has the best shot at having a marriage. Politically, on the federal level all the way down to the local level, there's been such cooperation that will make this thing go. I think EPA is for it. DEP is for it. When is it going to get done? I think it's going to be a five-year program."

Mr O'Donnell: "It's hard to tell at this point. We have to go through our process. Hopefully that can work out for the best. I wouldn't want to say less than five years. (The projects might be linked) ... if everything works out and we go through our process and that's the environmentally suitable (disposal) site and the least costly, then it will happen."

Rep. Straus: "I think they have to be put together for the success of either or both of them. I could never predict on the timing of either of them because we're prior to any formal record of decision, so a lot of calendars haven't even started running."

Mr. Manley: "I think the marriage is necessary and I think the regulatory agencies are all working together here, so maybe they can set a record here. That's all that I can say."

Capt. Taylor: "As part of the subcommittee on the dredging, I agree with Rep. Straus. The committee does agree that there has to be a marriage. I can't tell you how long it's going to take, but I can tell you it has to be very quick. We are already losing commerce. It would be an awful shame to have a wonderful, clean, deep harbor with no ships. We've lost programs already and it needs to be done a lot quicker than five years."

Mr. Babb-Brott: "Boston Harbor took four years. That's what I throw out here. A lot of that time was taken achieving consensus on a disposal site."

Ms. Brady: "As long as folks don't get over-invested in their various positions and can work in a really objective way, and in a persistent way in case one project delays the other."