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A marriage proposal: commerce and cleanup

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Environmental officials and local leaders believe they can arrange the marriage of two high-profile projects — the environmental cleanup and navigational dredging of New Bedford Harbor.

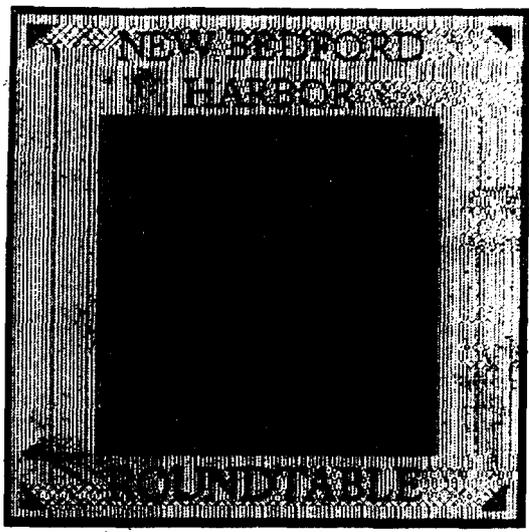
But they concede it may be a long courtship before the two are wed. It's estimated that environmental dredging to remove about 500,000 cubic yards of contaminants from New Bedford's Harbor won't be finished for another five years at the earliest.

And at least one environmental official said it's possible the relationship could sour — the two may never be compatible.

"There are a lot of advantages...to linking the projects," said Peg Brady of Massachusetts Coastal Zone Management. "There are still many unanswered questions... Our agency and the (other) agencies are examining these questions."

On Tuesday, The Standard-Times hosted the second in a series of roundtable discussions on the New Bedford Harbor cleanup.

During the first meeting in September, participants discussed



what had been done to clean the harbor and what remained to be done. During the second session, the eight participants discussed whether environmental dredging could be done in conjunction with navigational dredging.

As part of the continuing cleanup of the New Bedford Harbor Superfund site, the Environmental Protection Agency, working in conjunction with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, plans to dredge and remove about 500,000 cubic yards of contaminated material from the area. Although plans for that phase of the harbor cleanup haven't been finalized, EPA officials previously said material will be stored in waterfront lagoons known as combined disposal facilities, or CDFs.

At the same time, the Army Corps is examining the possibility of dredging between 500,000 and 1 million cubic yards of material from the harbor to deepen the federal channel. Local maritime interests, who warn the city will continue to lose business to other ports if the harbor is not dredged soon, are hoping additional dredging can be done in both public and private sec-

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tions of the harbor in order to increase its financial viability.

Some, including State Rep. William Straus, D-Mattapoisett, are exploring whether material removed as part of the navigation dredging project can be used as cap material for the sediments removed as part of the Superfund cleanup.

He argues that combining the two projects would serve two primary purposes: providing a suitable home for contaminated material removed during the navigational dredging which might otherwise be difficult to dispose of, while at the same time

streamlining the often lengthy and complicated process of receiving the necessary dredging permits.

But there are some substantial obstacles. While the EPA has not yet finalized its plans for dredging and disposing of contaminated material, some vocal opposition to CDFs has already surfaced. Such opposition could delay the environmental cleanup.

"A lot depends on the situation within the City of New Bedford as to what will occur with the CDFs," said Maurice Beaudcin of the Army Corps. "That could delay decisions, as far as dredging (is concerned) for up to five years if not longer."

According to Ed O'Donnell of the Army Corps, the harbor's federal

channel is authorized to a 30-foot depth at mean low water. The main ship channel now is only 25 feet in some areas. Still others may be even shallower.

Mr. O'Donnel said to get the main ship channel back to authorized depths, about 1 million cubic yards of material will have to be dredged.

If the Army Corps was to scale back the project and concentrate on dredging only the most critical areas of the federal channel, it would have to remove about 500,000 cubic yards of material dredged from both inside and outside the hurricane barrier.

Some say the navigational dredging must be done as soon as possible. This year, Maritime Terminal Inc., a waterfront warehousing and cold

Storage firm, lost two ships to the port of Philadelphia because New Bedford's harbor is too shallow, said Capt. Michael H.M. Taylor, Maritime Terminal's vice president. He estimates the loss of those two ships cost the local economy in excess of \$300,000.

Whether such losses can be prevented in the future will likely not be decided by those who gathered at The Standard-Times last week. Officials made one thing clear: Those who will be impacted by the cleanup and dredging projects — the city of New Bedford, the town of Fairhaven and maritime interests from both communities — must ask that the two projects be done in conjunction.