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Page C2 / The Standard-Times, New Bedford, MA, Thursday, January 25, 1996

Superfund
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State official: Lack of open minds could sink city harbor cleanup

By Robert Handlocks
Standard-Times staff writer

NEW BEDFORD — Despite opposition from residents and a community group, a state official said last night that its possible no action might be taken to clean up the contaminated New Bedford Harbor.

Helen Waldorf, environmental analyst for the Department of Environmental Protection, said if the community continues to reject proposals recommended by state and federal officials, it could wind up getting nothing. Ms. Waldorf, who has studied the harbor contaminated with PCB's, is concerned that residents aren't looking at options with an open mind.

Currently, some of the most highly contaminated sediment is being stored in a capped lagoon called a CDF — a combined disposal facility — just off of Sawyer Street. City residents, councilors and Hands Across the River have argued strongly against the CDF's, claiming that the facility will leak up to 300 pounds of carcinogenic sediment into the water and air, putting the residential area at risk.

Jim Simmons, president of Hands Across the River, said the lagoon is the natural resource that could serve as a tourist attraction and an economic resource. Mr. Simmons said the people have spoken again and again.

"The fact remains that the lagoon should be cleaned up, not covered up," he said. "People are getting more and more exasperated."

Equally exasperated, Ms. Waldorf said the community is going to have to come up with a viable alternative, though she believes the CDF's are the best option. She also mentioned a government plan to store the sediment in the

abandoned Pierce Mills nearby.

"People could blow it and the government could walk away," she said. "The community needs to say 'Let's make a deal.' Win, lose or draw, you want to stay in the game, but they're not even playing the game. It's a difficult situation, but I think we could work out a business deal here."

Representing Hands Across the River, Charles Lord from Alternatives for Community and Environment railed against CDF's as "sub-standard waste facilities," located dangerously close to families on Sawyer Street.

"They don't meet the standards," he said, adding the permanent storage facilities are unlined and will leak 300 pounds of sediment in three years. "The key issue in terms of the neighbors is that this is a hazardous waste facility."

Mr. Simmons suggested moving the sediment to another point in the harbor, away from the community, but Ms. Waldorf said dredging the sediment sends toxins into the water and air.

Ward 2 Councilor Paul Koczera said officials claimed there was no hazard when they moved the highly-concentrated sludge to the temporary CDF on Sawyer Street, but now are claiming that they can't safely move it from the lagoon.

Ms. Waldorf and David Dickerson, project manager for the New Bedford Harbor Superfund Project, took issue with points made in the attorney's presentation.

Mr. Dickerson said the issue needs clarification and also said people need to keep "an open mind."

A public forum is scheduled at 2 p.m. on Feb. 11 at Recordcoos on Coggeshall Street.