

'Battle of the Lagoon' nearing final round

New Bedford Forum meets EPA tonight

By Hans Schattle
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NEW BEDFORD — Negotiations in what could be called the "Battle of the Lagoon" resume tonight at a New Bedford Forum meeting. It has been a long, venomous fight. Here's how the scorecard reads now:

■ Round 1:

Last fall, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency insisted on filling a lagoon off Belleville Avenue with roughly 300,000 cubic yards of sediment containing PCBs. The sludge is slated to be dredged from the Acushnet River and capped into holding tanks.

The entire lagoon, the EPA said.

No way, replied residents, politicians and environmental groups who aim to develop a waterfront park and want

the lagoon cleaned instead of covered.

■ Round 2:

Earlier this month, the EPA floated a compromise and suggested using half the lagoon, already contaminated with about 75,000 cubic yards of polychlorinated biphenyl laced sediment.

Half the lagoon, the EPA said.

No way, repeated the opponents, who booed — yes, they booed — the EPA's representatives on the spot. One woman compared that solution to drinking half a bottle of hemlock.

■ Round 3:

Many members of the New Bedford Forum, the group hammering out a compromise on the harbor cleanup,

want to hear two words from the EPA at tonight's 6 o'clock meeting at Greater New Bedford Regional Vocational-Technical High School:

No lagoon.

But some fear the EPA might try for something else:

A sliver of the lagoon.

"A sliver is just as bad as a half and just as bad as a third," Ward 2 City Councilor Paul Koczera said. "You can put a sliver anywhere."

Jim Simmons, president of Hands Across the River, said his group will not settle for a sliver, either.

"If my calculations are correct, they don't need the lagoon at all," Mr. Simmons said.

The EPA's team has been scrambling to determine sludge storage alternatives to the lagoon in time for tonight's meeting.

David Dickerson, the EPA's project manager for the harbor cleanup, said the federal agency is considering

enlarging two potential holding areas — a strip north of the lagoon, between the river and a row of factories, and a swath of land near North Terminal.

In order to clean rather than cover the lagoon, the EPA needs to find a home for 270,000 cubic yards of PCB tainted sediment now sitting in the river, plus another 75,000 cubic yards already in the lagoon. The federal agency had favored using the lagoon because of its proximity to the sludge targeted for dredging.

Mr. Dickerson said he was not ready to detail the proposal the EPA will bring to the table tonight, although he hinted the EPA might abandon the lagoon if it finds the right alternative.

"It's still part of the picture," Mr. Dickerson said of the lagoon, "but because there is so much opposition against it, were trying to see if we can downsize it further or even use another location for a (holding area). We need to redo

the volume numbers and have a little more of a focused discussion."

Both sides in this battle have urged for the lagoon's fate to be decided quickly. Proposed changes and cuts in the federal Superfund program could undermine the chances that the PCBs in the harbor will eventually be treated, rather than merely stored.

The EPA, therefore, has repeatedly tried to quell opposition to the lagoon by arguing that time is of the essence. The EPA's critics agree about the risks of delay, but they continue to demand the EPA back down on the lagoon.

"My feeling is enough's enough," said State Rep. William Straus, D-Mattapoisett. "If this (lagoon) is just too much an obstacle to the whole project, if that's the last impediment everyone seems to have identified, let's just get rid of it and move along with the project."

Mr. Straus said that yet another alternative storage location — the area between the hurricane barrier and The Standard-Times field — might also work into the equation as a lagoon alternative.

Because the city also hopes to accomplish some navigational dredging through the cleanup, the sheer size of this site near South Terminal could end up working to the city's advantage, Rep. Straus said.

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