

Our view

Lagoon is spared, and EPA preserves good relationship

The magic bullet hasn't yet been found for New Bedford harbor's PCB problems, but at least the EPA has proven increasingly sensitive to the side effects of its various cleanup prescriptions.

This time, as opposed to the fight over a PCB incinerator being located smack in the middle of a heavily populated area, the issue was more about aesthetics and neighborhoods than health and safety.

Yet for those who live near a large lagoon on the riverfront near Coffin Avenue, the EPA's plan to store contaminated sludge there was the last straw. Maybe the lagoon isn't perfectly clean. Maybe it isn't the highest-rent neighborhood around. But many of the people who have lived nearby for many years appreciate their lagoon. It is their neighbor, their friend, a stopover for birds and a natural air-conditioner in the heat of summer. They know the potential it has when the day arrives and the abandoned mills are removed, and the area restored as a public park.

None of that would have been possible if the EPA had persisted in its plans to

store thousands of cubic yards of PCB-contaminated sludge in that lagoon. The act would have been irreversible, the decline of the neighborhood inevitable.

In contrast to past years, though, the EPA has gone beyond issuing ultimatums. Now there is dialogue, now people are listening to each other. And now, the EPA heard the message: We don't deserve this. There has to be a better alternative.

This week the EPA relented. It notified Hands Across the River that the lagoon would be spared, and that instead a holding area to the north will be greatly expanded to store the material that will be dredged from the river.

This isn't perfect, either, of course. The holding area will grow from 1,700 feet to a new length of 4,200 feet. It won't be pretty and it won't be nice.

But it is a step away from the more damaging plan, and it is further evidence that as this project bumps along, with people groping for answers to seemingly insurmountable questions, that the EPA is keeping its mind and ears open to the concerns of local people. To those who spoke up and to those who listened, congratulations.

New Bedford
12/2
11/1/96

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3/2/96