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Spoils site search gets down, dirty

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By Shaun Manley
TIMES NEWS SERVICE

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has narrowed the search for a site to dump Saginaw River silt to three from 30.

One of the proposed sites, in Zilwaukee Township, is sparking opposition.

"We don't want reeking toxic mud by our homes," said Donn Rajaniemi, who moved from Pontiac to his riverfront home on Melbourne about two years ago. "I may lose my shirt, but I'm going to try to stop it."

The other sites - a General Motors Corp. landfill and property southeast of Cheboyganing Creek, both in Buena Vista Township - are in 100-year floodplains.

The Army Corps expects to dredge 3.1 million cubic yards of silt over two decades beginning in April 2004, a memo to the state Department of Environmental Quality indicates.

Keeping the river channel open to shipping is essential for about 15 companies in Bay and Saginaw counties.

Terry A. Long, principal planner for the dredging project, said there are "numerous hoops" the Army Corps has to jump through before the job can start.

Experts still must analyze archeological factors, whether the proposed sites already are polluted and whether the properties are large enough, Long said.

The Army Corps has sought a disposal site since the mid-1970s, but repeatedly has run into environmental challenges or stiff opposition from nearby residents.

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The Army Corps dumped river spoils for 25 to 30 years onto Channel Island in Saginaw Bay, just north of the river mouth. The island now is full.

It ceased dredging in the mid-1990s as the site in Saginaw Bay began to fill and it could no longer justify the cost of trucking the spoils more than 10 miles to the mouth of the river for transport to the island.

The proposed GM site is an 87-acre licensed landfill between where the Saginaw Nodular Iron Plant once stood and the Saginaw Wastewater Treatment Plant.

The problem there is the cost, said Saginaw County Public Works Commissioner James A. Koski, who has worked with the Army Corps in its search effort.

"We'd have to build a new waste treatment plant," he said.

The silt contains dioxin and furans, a clear liquid byproduct of wood tar, at levels exceeding safe human contact, said Debra MacKenzie-Taylor, a DEQ toxicology specialist.

Health concerns related to exposure to the byproducts include a higher incidence of cancer and birth defects.

Koski said that because of the contamination, any stormwater runoff from the site would need treatment.

The waste treatment plant, however, does not treat water for dioxins and furans, he said.

"(Using the GM site) opens a whole new can of worms that nobody wants to open," Koski said.

Long said the spoils could be spread over a 400-acre field surrounded by earthen berms, with little further treatment needed.

That is why the 600-acre Zilwaukee Township site is attractive.

Zilwaukee Township Clerk Patricia Bradt said she has heard complaints from residents, including Bruce and Sue Cameron, who live across from the proposed site.

"I've been out here for about eight years now, and I just don't understand why they would want to turn this into a confined disposal facility," Sue Cameron said.

Koski said there are no easy answers.

"I wouldn't be a part of this if I thought it would cause pollution," Koski said. "It would be nice to have land untouched and remain that way, but in about five years, the (river) will close if it isn't dredged."

The Times News Service could not reach Maryellen Burke, who pays taxes on the land, for comment.

Army Corps workers would begin dumping silt at the far edges of the property, away from houses, Koski said.

"There are only about 35 days out of the year that they could dredge the river," he said, "and at one or two truckfulls a day, this area wouldn't get filled for a very long time."

The Army Corps will host public meetings about the proposed sites before it makes a decision, Long said.

"It would be unfair of me to set a date right now, because we don't have a

final place to put the silt," he said. "We're just too early in the game at this point to tell."

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