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Site near Zilwaukee may get river sludge

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THE SAGINAW NEWS

One hundred and fifty years ago, settlers founded Zilwaukee with hopes that its location alongside the Saginaw River would bring prosperity.



Today, residents fear that same body of water could bring about the death of their small community.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has its sights set on Zilwaukee Township as a potential site for a 281-acre dredged material disposal facility designed to hold 3.1 million cubic yards of material collected from the river over a minimum 20-year period.

Toxins contained at the facility could become exposed to residents, erode property values and deplete tax revenue, township officials say.

"It will basically bankrupt this township," said Sue A. Cameron, a township resident who is part of a committee investigating the corps' findings. "We have to launch a strong opposition or we're going to be out of luck."

The township board dove into the opposition during a Tuesday meeting, unanimously approving a resolution declaring its objection to the dredged material disposal facility without a more thorough study.

Engineers released an initial assessment of the project's impact in May, but now township leaders want more information before the site is given a green light.

Officials call the early report a "Reader's Digest" version of the examination they want the corps to initiate.

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The initial study offers only vague information and leaves many questions unanswered, Supervisor David F. Bradt said.

"We're calling for a full environmental statement," said Cameron, whose property on Melbourne is near the proposed site.

The 54-year-old believes the corps is avoiding the task because such a report would reveal severe environmental effects and prolong action while more data were collected.

The corps' initial assessment also designates an alternative site in Buena Vista Township that Cameron says won't affect as many people.

Donn M. Rajaniemi's property on Melbourne neighbors the proposed site.

"I can't imagine anyone in favor of a reeking, toxic mud pit next door," he said. "We need to stop this from happening."

Terry A. Long, an official with the chief plan formulation branch of the corps' Detroit district, said both time and money are factors in why Zilwaukee Township is considered the primary option.

"We've been looking for a site for 25 years," he said. "This is a project way overdue."

He added that the Buena Vista site would cost more because it's smaller and would require more funding to build larger dikes to hold dredged material.

Long disagrees with the concerned residents' opinions that such a site would have a substantial negative effect on the township economy.

A similar facility built in Holland a few years ago has had no drastic effects on property values, he said.

The site's presence would help the overall mid-Michigan economy, he added.

If a site is approved in the summer, construction could begin as early as spring of 2005.

Construction is estimated to cost \$1.5 million.

No dredged material disposal facility is available on the Saginaw River, and the prolonged absence of one could deter shipping companies from doing business along the body of water, he added.

A decision by the corps could come as early as July, Long said.

Saginaw County has agreed to acquire the necessary real estate interests. The appraised value of the 281 acres of land was \$726,000 in 2004, the corps report said.

An informational meeting will take place at 7 p.m. Wednesday, June 30, at Saginaw Valley State University's Curtiss Hall, room C-100.

The meeting will feature officials from the corps and the Department of Environmental Quality.

James A. Koski, county public works commissioner, said he hopes the meeting dispels "bad information" he believes has circulated in the community concerning the project.

Some of that bad information -- which he didn't want to repeat -- might have contributed to some of the residents' worries.

"I understand their concerns," he said of Zilwaukee Township residents. "Up until you have that (meeting), you get rumors though."

All paperwork and data collected dealing with the project is available for the public to view in his office in the Saginaw County Courthouse, 111 S. Michigan, he said. t

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