

Dow, state defend Saginaw River dredging project

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Sue Cameron emotionally pleaded with the Saginaw County Board of Commissioners to go on record against allowing Dow Chemical Co. to dump material at a Saginaw River spoils site now under construction.

But the Zilwaukee Township resident's appeal Tuesday, and that of members of the environmental group Lone Tree Council, went unanswered.

Commissioners met at the Horizons Conference Center in Saginaw Township to hear a detailed presentation on the construction progress of the 220-acre disposal site on 581 acres the county owns on Melbourne straddling Saginaw and Bay counties.

State Department of Environmental Quality Deputy Director Stanley "Skip" Pruss did acknowledge, however, the state has encouraged Dow to contribute to the site construction -- but it doesn't have a "quid pro quo" agreement with the company to dump material there. Site permits now in force don't allow it, and changing them would require public hearings and several agencies to approve them.

"There isn't any deal with Dow to access that facility," Pruss said.

Dow officials say their interest in the site is no secret. It stems from the possibility a regulatory agency could order the Midland company to dredge contaminated rivers.

"We still support the construction of the facility from an economic standpoint for the county," said John C. Musser, Dow spokesman. "We also continue to have a desire to have the option of using the site if we need to."

Barring ongoing legal challenges, the site could open next fall, said County Public Works Commissioner James A. Koski. It will have the capacity to hold 3.1 million cubic yards and collect river spoils for at least 20 years.

"It's too important not to do," he said.

Saginaw County has worked closely on the project with the DEQ, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Saginaw River Alliance, a group of about two dozen businesses that depend on the waterway for river commerce.

The state suspects Dow is responsible for dioxin contamination in the river. That's why the chemical giant should help pay for construction, Pruss said.

Dow has contributed \$530,000 to the Saginaw River Alliance, said William G. Webber, alliance leader and president of Sargent Docks & Terminal Inc.

Michelle Hurd-Riddick, a Lone Tree spokeswoman who called the presentation a "pep rally" for Koski and the project with strict limits that constrained often emotional public comment, asked commissioners for a chance to give a counter-presentation at a later date.

The environmental activist also accused the state of engaging with Dow in talks out of public view.

Pruss said the state doesn't have anything to hide. "We're trying to be as transparent as we can with this project," he said.

Commissioner Tim Novak, a Carrollton Township Democrat, expects a resolution calling on limits of what's allowed at the spoils site will reappear before the board.

It's still unclear, however, what authority the county will have to restrict what's dumped.

The county will have a say, said Michael K. O'Bryan, a Corps of Engineers chief of engineering and technical services in Detroit, but "whether you have total veto power, that hasn't been worked out yet."

State and federal officials say only river sediment cleared for ship navigation in the upper Saginaw River can end up at the disposal facility.

The DEQ, meanwhile, has concluded the disposal site will benefit the environment because it will take contaminants out of the river, improving water quality, Pruss said.

The site also will have stricter environmental safeguards, such as dikes, monitoring wells and a clay slurry wall to prevent groundwater contamination, than 22 other dredge disposal facilities in the state, he said.

Businesses that depend on freighter transportation say silt accumulation has caused at least four ships to run aground this year, Webber said. The latest happened Tuesday when the 630-foot road salt freighter Algoway was stuck for about two hours before a tug freed it, he said.

The River Alliance has spent about \$200,000 on tugboat assistance this shipping season, Webber said.

About 285 jobs depend on keeping the waterway open, he said.

"If this river dies, we lose our companies; we lose our jobs," Webber said.

While the site's purpose is to make the river more navigable, even the officials spearheading the project admit that the dredging will result in the collection of hazardous chemicals.

Zilwaukee Township Clerk Patricia A. Bradt accused Koski of filing a "slap suit" against her because she walked onto the spoils site during construction.

"It's Saginaw County property," she said. "How can you trespass on Saginaw County property? It's like going to a park."

"It is a construction site," Koski said. "You have to (wear) the proper equipment."

Bradt, who said she just wanted to attend a construction meeting, asserted the township has remained locked out of on-site gatherings and kept in the dark about what's happening.

"He's taking a beautiful community, and he's destroying it," she said. v

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