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Army Corps to begin Forge River study

Bishop credits pressure from the community

By *Bryan Finlayson*

At a Brookhaven Town-owned boat launch on Riviera Drive, Lou Borsella, a 50-year-old Mastic Beach resident, was loading a boat onto a trailer when he uttered a sour remark about the Forge River. "This river is a wreck. It's polluted, it stinks, it's filthy," he said on Tuesday. "With the condition that it's in now, I wouldn't want to have a house on it, that's for sure."

Residents who have grown up around the Forge River have complained that it's not what it used to be. Fish caught in the river are no longer safe to eat—if any can be caught at all. The waters are unsafe to swim in and it has become increasingly difficult to navigate a boat there, residents claim. As Mr. Borsella drove away with the boat, he passed a small gathering of scientists, public officials and environmentalists who were announcing a first-time-ever federal investment in the river.

A \$100,000 Reconnaissance Study by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, to be released early this winter, will decide whether there is a "federal interest" in saving the river, U.S Representative Tim Bishop, who secured funding for the study last year, said at the gathering.

"This is an important step in determining where there is a federal interest in preserving and restoring the waterway," Mr. Bishop said. "This is an important step, and it is one of only six new projects that the corps has taken up nationwide. It is a testament to the power of advocacy."

In their study, the corps will draw on already gathered information about the river, said Steve Couch, chief of the Coastal Section of the New York District U.S. Army Corps. Stony Brook University and the Suffolk County Department of Health are both currently monitoring the waterway.

The Army Corps hopes to find out what is wrong with the river and to see if the federal government would fund projects to fix it, he said.

"This is certainly something that, if it has the attention, could be accelerated," Mr. Couch said about federal funding.

The pollution of the river has been going on for years. It's attributed to increased nitrogen levels in the water, caused primarily by septic system and cesspool overflow, stormwater runoff, and years of sludge from the once thriving duck farm industry along the river.

In 2005, a plume of noxious odors hovered over the waters, possibly caused by sewage leaking into the river. Also in 2005, the Forge River Task Force was formed by local lawmakers, officials and environmentalists who monitor the polluted river. The group, along with citizen-based group Save the Forge River, played an advocacy role in securing federal funding for the river.

Later, in April 2006, the river was placed on New York State's impaired waterways list, meaning it is a priority for restoration efforts and both state and federal funding is available for cleanup efforts.

That same year, the problems on the river "had gotten so bad" that the Suffolk County Legislature passed a bill in August 2006 to post signs along the Forge. The signs advised residents of the potential health dangers associated with the river, said 3rd District County Legislator Kate Browning, who signed off on the legislation.

State Assemblyman Fred W. Thiele Jr., an advocate for restoring the health of the river, said that the waterway has gotten progressively worse over time.

"What has happened to the Forge River has not happened overnight," Mr. Thiele said. "Years and years of neglect have destroyed the health of the river. We need to turn it around now."

Skip Rooney, vice president of Save the Forge River, said that he hopes dredging of the Forge River and the Moriches Inlet, located south of the river, will take place after the study with the encouragement of the Army Corps.

"One of the goals of Save the Forge River is to have the Moriches Inlet deemed a navigable waterway," Mr. Rooney said. "Opening the inlet has been historically documented to increase tidal flow into the Forge River. This flushing of the river will help the water quality and increase the salinity of the water in the Forge River."

MaryAnn Johnston, president of the Affiliated Brookhaven Civic Organization, disagreed that dredging should be the sole solution to saving the Forge.

"We're very concerned that the Army Corps has a long history of dredging and very little history of environmental restoration," Ms. Johnston said. "There have been many instances where the Army Corps has taken on dredging projects that actually worsened the problem."

Peconic Baykeeper Kevin McAllister also cautioned against relying too heavily on dredging.

"It's a short-term solution to an extremely long-term problem," Mr. McAllister said. "It's dealing with the symptom instead of dealing with the problem, which is cesspools and nitrogen-enriched groundwater."

New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Regional Director Peter Scully cautioned that the Army Corps has not made a final decision on what exactly might be done on the river. "To fully implement the effective remedies, we need to understand scientifically the various causes of the problem," Mr. Scully said. "The community has been patient, I think they are ready to see results." The Brookhaven Town Board is scheduled to hold a public hearing on a proposed moratorium of development on properties surrounding the waterway on October 16.

The moratorium would stop new construction of buildings that would use septic tanks and other sewage systems from being built on upward of 12,000 parcels surrounding the watershed.

It would not halt construction of structures that produce no nitrates, such as a new tool shed or garage.

Carol Bissonette, councilwoman for the 6th District, called this moratorium "vital" to stopping the inflow of nitrates into the river.

"Any further delay [in approving the moratorium] is only delaying what should have happened months ago," she said.

Assuming a positive outcome in the Reconnaissance Study, Mr. Bishop said, the next step in the federal process would be a Feasibility Study to outline the parameters of a project to restore the river's health. By law, that study would need a 50-50 federal-local cost-sharing agreement.



Lawmakers announced the start of a U.S. Army Corps study on Tuesday that will examine the ecological dangers to the Forge River and determine if there is federal interest in funding projects, such as dredging, to restore its health. Some community members emphasized that dredging is a short-term solution to a long-term problem: cesspool runoff. **BRYAN FINLAYSON**